

The true cost of our food – We are eating up the world

Our bargains are not cheap!

Here in Europe and the US we have been witnessing that we need an ever smaller portion of our income to buy our food. We have lived through a highly competitive phase where giant super market chains – engage in an aggressive price war in order to secure a share of the market. This has driven down the prices.

So, we should be happy, because we are being offered many bargains! However, the price tags for our food do not reflect its true costs. The true cost for such bargains is being paid by someone. It is being paid by the producers of such food: there are the local farmers who are not even being paid a price to cover their production costs for milk or wheat etc; it is being paid by farm workers and employees in large retail chains who are deprived of their rights and just wages; it is being paid by overseas countries that satisfy our appetites while disregarding the nutrition of their own population; and it is being paid by our environment.

There is first of all **the cost of production**: As salaries are high in Europe, an ever greater part of our food is being produced in countries of the South, i.e. in countries where large segments of the population is suffering from food scarcity and malnutrition. Encouraged/forced by World Bank and IMF these countries have re-oriented their production towards export of food, flowers and animal feeds for the North. Increasingly we witness a division of the world into specialized production zones with the result that our food criss-crosses the globe. Much of our fruits and vegetables are being transported 3000 kilometres across Europe before they land on our table. Food items from overseas (such as beans from Kenya) travel much further of course. Someone in the UK calculated that the food of a typical festive Sunday dinner may altogether have travelled some 26.000 kilometres, contributing its hefty share to **air pollution** and climate change.

The cost to the environment:

The export oriented food production is being granted privileged access to water and the irrigation technique used are often very wasteful of a resource: Thus a bag of washed and sorted salad that we purchase for 1,25 Euro cost Kenyans 50 litre of precious water!

Wasteful irrigation dries up riverbeds and boreholes lead to a sinking groundwater level, as a consequence depriving the local, especially the poor (rural and urban) population of drinking water.

At present 70% of all **drinking water** is being used for the production of food (not counting the rain water). A special problem in this respect is the growing appetite for meat across the world. But for the production of 1 kilogram of meat 15 cubic meters of water are needed, while the production of grain only requires between 0,4- 3 cubic meters of water.

The recent UN climate report has alerted everyone to the fact that – due to global warming – resources of potable water is going to become very scarce. Thus, the present 'waste' of water in food (meat) production is becoming unsustainable.

In order to continue to produce meat in the shortest of time, animals are being kept in giant farms (often under scandalous conditions) and are being fed a special high protein diets. Up until the BSE crisis agrobusiness made use of animals not fit for consumption. Since there now exists a ban on using such **animal feeds** agrobusiness has discovered genetically modified **soy beans**. And as a consequence 60-80% of the animal feed used in Europe or the US consists of soy being produced in the Amazon rain forest. In the Mato Grosso, the „lungs of the world” are being pockmarked and increasingly destroyed by ever growing monocultures of soy beans.

A further problem is the fact that such monocultures can only thrive with the massive use of **fertilizers and pesticides** that damages the health of the soil and water as well as the health of the agricultural workers. In many countries environmental standards either don't exist or compliance is not being checked.

Also in the EU we can witness unsustainable means of food production: Southern Spain has specialized in bringing fresh fruit and vegetables to our table in and out of season. Thus, we can find hot houses covering an area larger than 25.000 hectares/ 320 square kilometres where much of our vegetables and fruits are being produced throughout the year. The production methods make massive use of water, fertilizers and pesticides, and most of the food items never even touching the soil. On average, each European consumes about 10 kilos of fruit and vegetables produced under such conditions.

We may assume that at least all of this brings employment to Andalusia, until we learn about the scandalous **working** and living **conditions** for up to 80.000 (often illegal) seasonal workers coming from Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Often these people not even are offered housing, sanitary facilities or electricity.

Thus it can happen that of one Euro spent on bananas, the plantation worker will get 1,5 cent; the owner of the plantation gets 10 cent; the giant food company takes 31 cent, the wholesale trader gets 17 cent and the retailer 40 cent. The situation for coffee or other products is similar.

Little wonder that in North and South small producers are being squeezed out of production. The concentration in the food retail sector leads to a growing concentration in the area of food production (mega farms, giants milk processing plants or slaughterhouses etc). And most of the infamous subsidy payments of the US and the EU are not reaching small farmers, but 20% of the EU farms (all of them large in size) receive 80% of the subsidies. Other subsidies go to the giant milk processing plants and slaughterhouses.

In 1999 8 % of the farms produced 68% of all US agrarian products. And, between 1980 and 2001 50% of all people working on European farms lost their job, in the Philippines 1.2 million were laid off between 1999 and 2000. In Germany 40-50 farms are being closed each day.

And with recent run on alternative fuel sources, we may expect the explosion of massive monocultures of raps or other oilseeds, for palm oil or for maize, both in Europe and in the Southern countries. What will all this mean for small producers and for those people who already now suffer from food scarcity and malnutrition?

Hunger is mostly a question of distribution.

Hunger in some parts of the world is caused by our excessive appetite.

Hunger carries the face of a woman.

Hunger exists in rural areas.

The present pattern of food consumption and production is unsustainable, it is wasteful of natural resources and leaves behind hunger and deserts. All of the costs (to the health of environment and people) are not included in the price we pay for our food at the supermarket checkout. This price is being passed to the poor, to the environment and to our children's children.

There are **8 good reasons for changing our consumption patterns** to a more sustainable way:

- Eating sustainably, i.e. eating – whenever possible locally produced food, respects the limits of our Earth and ensures that all people will be able to be fed;
- Eating together and knowing that what I consume has been fairly traded contributes to justice and peace on earth;
- Eating biologically sound food benefits both consumer and producer;
- Eating seasonal food saves transportation costs and allows the developing countries to concentrate on producing food for their own people;
- Eating local products helps us to rediscover a 'Taste of home' and helps to retain smaller farms and local biodiversity (genetic material in form of seeds and breeds of animals etc)
- Eating less meat and more vegetarian food is healthy for people and environment;
- Eating meat from biological production does less damage to the environment here and abroad
- Eating local and ecologically sound food helps to preserve our biosphere and the genetic pool in the one world.