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From World Hunger Day to World Food Day

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The Current Column

of 12 October 2016

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Bonn, 12 October 2016. World Food Day is coming up again on 16 October. On this day, the international community focuses its attention on those who are still going hungry in an age of global affluence. 16 October 1945 is the date on which the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was established. The number of people going hungry has remained alarmingly constant since then, with somewhere between 800 million and one billion individuals suffering from malnutrition worldwide. While the proportion of malnourished people has fallen from some 35% to 11%, this is only due to the fact that the world's population has tripled since 1945. But can this really be considered a success? Developing countries now have more overnourished than malnourished individuals. However, both the number and proportion of malnourished people remain particularly high in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

These figures are already disgraceful in and of themselves. Added to this is the fact that "modern" food production techniques employing large-scale machinery, mineral fertilisers and chemical pest control are reaching their biological, environmental and social limits in global surplus regions such as North and South America. At the same time, natural resources are being destroyed in many poor countries as a result of overuse with a low level of productivity. For example, irrigation water is becoming scarce in many places. Agricultural and general biodiversity is disappearing. Climate change poses the greatest threat to farming activities in the world's poorest, subtropical regions. Crises and conflict weaken the ability of entire nations to provide for their own needs. Additionally, we are seeing more price fluctuation on international agricultural markets. The bio-economy (use of biomass to generate energy or as an oil substitute in the petrochemical industry) is giving rise to new competition over food. But this is no simple cause and effect situation and there are no quick solutions. Since the FAO was established, there has been no fundamental lack of food, but rather distribution problems at specific locations and times and in connection with specific individuals. And yet, without a continual increase in food production, the global "supply margin" will be quickly lost. The food distribution issue is not an easy one to resolve either.

Agricultural production in wealthy nations needs to be made more environmentally friendly, but this would reduce productivity, causing agricultural prices to rise nationally and on the global market. This could lead to more malnutrition among poor consumers in poor countries. Efforts to combat food waste and avoid the consumption of meat could redress the balance here.

The situation is different when it comes to growing demand in developing countries over the next few decades, which is set to far exceed current surpluses and potential savings.

Consequently, there is a need to further increase global agricultural production activities. The main reserves for this are found in poorer developing countries, where yields often stand at just 20-30% of the realistic potential, with similar proportions for avoidable food losses. Additionally, the proportion of food production offered on the market must be drastically increased in order to meet the needs of growing cities. Smallholders are key in this process, still accounting for two thirds of all malnourished people. If they increase their production levels, it will have two effects in terms of food security: more food will be produced, and farmers' households will achieve higher incomes. This can only be achieved if they and their organisations are given massive support in the form of short-term inputs such as fertiliser, long-term investment such as machinery, (more easily accessible) loans, and good (research-based) advisory services. This must all be embedded in a conducive agricultural policy, rural development policies and coherent macro-policies. Production needs to be sustainable and location-adapted. Large-scale farms are also useful in some cases here, as they can accept greater risks, provide more stability and drive the organisation of value chains. However, they will not be able to and should not replace smallholder production in the foreseeable future.

These farming activities must be supported by social security programmes for the temporarily and chronically poor without land and for smallholders themselves. In the longer term, jobs also need to be created outside of the agricultural sector to provide employment for the growing number of young people.

Action must be taken at international level too through measures such as free agricultural trade; regulated opportunities for safeguarding against harvest fluctuations; expansion of international agricultural research with good links to national systems; food-oriented guardrails for the bio-economy; measures for safeguarding biodiversity; and the establishment of international social security systems for managing major, transnational crises. Additional efforts for combating climate change are essential if we are to succeed in developing climate-smart agriculture. Only in this way will we still be able to largely eradicate hunger by 2030. Once this has been achieved, and not before, then we can truly speak of a World Food Day and celebrate it accordingly.