

World food scarcity and the challenges of climate change and bio energy



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By Shobha Shukla

FAO was founded in 1945 on the 16th of October - a day which is observed as World Food Day (WFD) in about 150 countries all over the world. The theme for this year's WFD is 'World Food Scarcity : The Challenges Of Climate Change And Bio Energy' as there is a strong need to expand global awareness to reduce the effect of severe climate patterns on agriculture and the impact of bio fuels on food production.

Global warming and the bio fuel boom are threatening to push the number of hungry even higher in times to come. During 2007 alone, around 50 million more have been added to the rank of the world's hungry due to rising prices, thus pushing the number of unfed to about 900 millions. The world seems to be further distancing itself from reaching the U.N. Millenium Development Goal of halving hunger and poverty by 2015. Poor harvests, high oil costs, bio fuels and a rising demand for basic staple crops, especially in fast growing Asian countries, have been cited as examples for the spiralling food prices which have sparked protests, even riots, prompting the U.N.Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to give a wake up call.

Global wheat prices have more than doubled during the past year due to poor weather conditions in some wheat producing areas (droughts in Australia and Europe); a shift by farmers to growing crops used in making bio fuels; and speculation by traders. . Though India is being touted as one of the world's hottest economy, nearly 50% of the world's hungry live in it. It is listed as a low income, food deficit country, with about 25% of its population subsisting on Rs.12 or less, a day and around 77% living on less than \$1 a day (according to the latest report of National Commission for Enterprises In The Unorganized Sector). It does boast of having a burgeoning 350 million strong middle class with improved diets (which was lamented by Ms.Rice and Mr.Bush to be one

of the causes of the global food price crisis). Yet around 35% of its population is food insecure, consuming less than 80% of the daily minimum requirement and it has the dubious distinction of having the highest rate of malnutrition in children below three years of age in the world (about 46%).

Today, India faces an agricultural crisis and hunger, which are due to not only current high prices of basic staples, but skewed up government policies too. Her rapid economic growth and accompanying shortages have also fuelled prices. State support for agriculture and irrigation has been slashed, price support reduced and the public distribution system drastically curtailed.. While the GDP grew at the rate of 8.5% in 2006-2007, the growth in agricultural sector was a mere 2.6%.Also marginal land holdings have increased and total cultivated land decreased, especially as more and more agricultural land is being seized by domestic and international corporations in the form of 'Special Economic Zones' for industrialization (as happened in Nandigram and to some extent in Singur).

The results have been disastrous as many studies show that agricultural growth reduces poverty and hunger much more than urban and industrial development. A spate of farmer suicides (about 150,000 during the last decade) is a rude reminder of our agrarian crisis and the grip of cash cropping on poor farmers, bolstered by seed and chemical agribusiness. India has belatedly sought to control prices by holding back essential commodities, curbing export of non-premium rice and waiving off loans of farmers. Obviously more needs to be done than mere cosmetic changes.

There is an urgent need to improve productivity of dry land farming (as 60% of India 's agriculture is rain dependent) as well as a better implementation of the National Rural Employment Programme and the

Public Distribution System.

The director general of FAO, Dr. Jacques Diouf, has called upon governments to pay urgent attention to needs of agriculture and water management and also increased investment in agriculture. At the recent Rome Summit held in June 2008, he pointed out that in 2006 the world spent 1.2 trillion dollars on arms. He asked, 'Against that backdrop how can we explain to people of good sense and good faith that it was not possible to find \$ 30 billion a year to enable the hungry to enjoy the most fundamental human right to food and thus the right to life.' Yet it has been estimated that there is enough food for all in the world, at least 2700 kilo calories per person, per day.

But it is the lack of purchasing power (more than food shortage due to population explosion and inclement weather conditions) which makes so many millions go to bed hungry every day. Hunger is linked to the denial of a living wage to the working poor. It is about denial of land to the landless. It is caused by socio economic policies that deny people the right to food. Resources are there to end hunger, but they are exploited by a miniscule few to the detriment of others So the real reason for all this hunger and poverty may well be policy and not scarcity; politics and not inevitability. The real culprits are economies that fail to offer everyone opportunities and societies that place economic efficiency above compassion.

As we Indians gloat over our victory in the recently concluded Nuclear Deal and as Ratan Tata and his Nano are hailed as an engineering marvel, let us do something sincere and concrete to put some food inside empty bellies. That then would be a truly Indian Miracle. Till then, let each one of us at least refrain from over eating and throwing away left over food in the dustbin.

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