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**A Billion People Undernourished
and Who Would Know?
Solidarity America
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This is the year in which the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) predicted that 1 billion humans will be undernourished across the earth.

At the end of last year, there were 963 million who lacked the food necessary to keep them alive and functioning at full capacity. Hunger has a way of sapping the physical, emotional, and psychological energies from a body, and when you get too many people in a nation or region who are in that condition, the society can not function, either.

That's what is happening in places like Haiti, Sudan, and Bangladesh, among the worst-off of the nations the FAO has warned us about.

All over the globe, it is not because there isn't enough food to feed the people, it's that they can't afford to buy it. It's an old story, possibly going back as far as written history. In the past couple of decades there have been stories about people lying in the streets of some of the world's most populous cities, next to open marketplaces full of food, yet they're hungry, if not starving.

Periodically, there are stories in newspapers and on television about these tragedies, most of which could be averted, if only...

This is not the case everywhere. There are some nations that are producing enough food to feed their people, but the conditions vary greatly. Some produce the food, but can't get it to the people who most need it - they might not have sufficient roads or vehicles or railroads to move it across the country.

Now, however, there is an element to which we would not have given a thought 20 years ago. Peasant and indigenous farmers around the world do not have the money to buy the seeds and fertilizers they need. They're too poor and there is not sufficient credit for them to borrow the money.

We live in a time when developing nations have been convinced that the western method of agriculture is best: They have been encouraged or forced to use seeds from corporate seed stock, instead of seed saved from the previous year, and to buy all of the "inputs" that you need to bring in a crop. With the patenting of seed stocks around the world, small farmers are beholden to transnational corporations, which require a premium price for the patented seed (and farmers accept that new seeds be bought every year, from the same corporations).

Usually, these seeds need fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides - or all of the "inputs" - to produce a crop sufficient to make a living. These, too, are bought from the same corporations.

The economic collapse that is affecting nations around the world is having a profound impact on families, workers, farmers, and communities everywhere.

Last December, the U.N.'s World Food Programme told the British newspaper, *The Independent*, that it could run out of food for the poorest nations, such as Haiti, Sudan, and Bangladesh "next year." This is that next year and there isn't a lot of discussion about what is to be done to solve this humanitarian crisis.

It's a crisis that appears to be one that will only grow and become more difficult to solve, because it involves the globalized economy, politics, foreign policy, and the aim of transnational corporations to find new places and methods to take a profit.

Farmers in what was then called the Third World were shocked after being drawn into the "Green Revolution" to find that they were expected to buy seeds and petroleum-based fertilizers and other chemicals from the companies that introduced the plan nearly a half-century ago. And that was well before the wave of "genetically modified" (GM) or, as many refer to them, genetically-manipulated, seeds. Because they are GM and developed in a biotechnology laboratory, they can be patented and farmers can be prevented from saving them from year to year, which requires that new seeds be purchased from the company at the beginning of every planting season.

Farm debt today is a crisis in India, bad enough that 100,000 farmer suicides in the past several years have been attributed to crushing debt.

All of these - economic distress, low family incomes, displacement of rural peoples, monopoly control of seed stocks, chaotic political conditions and war, and so many other factors - have contributed to the conditions around the world about which experts in the field of agriculture and nutrition and hunger are beginning to panic.

As with most things bureaucratic, however, the panic is not something that is easily seen on the surface, but it's there. The world is being warned, has been warned, over and over again, about the precarious state of food supplies.

One thing that is needed is a change in the way the "developed world" helps the "developing world" in meeting its food needs. Instead of trying to force western-style agriculture and farming practices onto peasant and indigenous farmers, it might be more effective if developing countries were assisted in improving their own farming techniques and native food plants and a distribution system that got the food to the people who need it, along with a way to preserve food that fits the culture and traditions.

Forget the profit motive for food aid. For example, when the U.S. has extended food aid to Africa, the requirement has been that the countries would have to buy U.S.-produced food and it would have to be shipped in American-flagged freighters - a boost for American agribusiness and shipping, but not much help to people who need to become self-sufficient in food.

It would be extremely helpful to encourage nations to provide women equal political and educational rights, keeping in mind that most of the food in the world is produced by women, mostly on small plots of land. As it is now, women in many countries couldn't prove their right to farm a plot of land. Women often don't have such rights. They don't, for example, have credit to get what they need to start their farming for the season, that is, if anyone would lend them money under any circumstances.

Education is basic to solving the problems of hunger and undernourishment. Students need to learn world history. They need to study anthropology, sociology, and the other humanities, not just economics, finance, accounting, and making the deal.

If students in the developed world knew more about the rest of the world, perhaps, when it came time for them to take over world affairs from their parents' generation, there would be fewer mistakes made in dealing with the developing world. Certainly, armed with such education, the mistakes made in other countries would be much less tragic than they have been in recent decades.

The problems of hunger and malnourishment as the FAO sees them will not be solved just by getting foodstuffs to hungry people. The discussion and debate that has yet to be engaged on any scale is the quality of nourishment that people get from their food, for even in countries where people eat three or more meals a day, there is widespread malnourishment. And, there is, here in America, the obesity "epidemic" and the diabetes "epidemic" and waves of other health problems.

We've never had that public discussion. It's time to start it.

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BlackCommentator.com *Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.*

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