

Poverty and Food Insecurity in the Developing World: For Us, Tolls the Bell

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Senator Lugar and others [Senators John Kerry, Susan Collins, Robert Casey, Richard Durbin and Thomas Harkin] of the US Senate have introduced 'Global Food Security Act' [GFSA, No. S384] to be administered by the USAID. [1] 'The bill was read twice and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations.' Although it seems to have a humanitarian purpose, GFSA is as sinister as the two pending bills HR875 and S425. I say this because not one US regulatory authority has successfully regulated industries in the interest of the people at least in the last ninety-odd years. Monopolies have been protected and cartels continue to kill in the US and across the world. And the second reason is that USAID is actually an arm of the US-Department of Defense; it serves US foreign policy interest which has little to do with humanitarianism.

There are reasons to suspect that this triad of bills when they become Acts will be misused against the weak and the poor, hence the need to evaluate the purpose of the bill.

Blaming food insecurity and hunger on poverty [essentially, inability to earn sufficient cash to buy food] has been the official position of most governments and of international institutions like UN-FAO, World Bank, IMF, and CGIAR. Unfortunately such notions serve powerful economic and political interests that perpetuate hunger, malnutrition, diseases, illiteracy, ignorance, urban slums and filth and rural poverty globally.

Those who influence the developmental agenda of governments seldom pause to think

that farmers and gardeners can always grow enough food to stave off hunger and malnutrition from less than 200 square meters of land; with about 2000 square meters they can feed themselves quite well with some surplus.

For rural Asians, Africans and South American farmers growing food has been a way of life. Yet the irony is that they are facing food shortage, hunger, under-nutrition, and poor health.

Sir Albert Howard, sent by the British Government to diagnose the causes of famine, hunger and deaths in India, after three decades of research, said this: "The agricultural practices of the Orient have passed the supreme test--they are almost as permanent as those of the primeval forest, of the prairie or of the ocean. The small-holdings of China, for example, are still maintaining a steady output and there is no loss of fertility after forty centuries of management." [2] The three unique characteristics of farming in India and China were cultivation of rice, mixed crops including legumes, and a balance between livestock and crops. Lesser known feature was inter and intra- community cooperation and efficient management of common pool resources like grazing lands, water sources, rivers, forests and seeds. However, the compulsions of 2009 are different from those of the 1900s to 40s, Howard's time, because of population growth, stressed ecosystems, and the desire of the ruling elite to keep the world in a state of perpetual socio-economic chaos and mayhem.

Agriculture will continue to remain the backbone of the developing countries. Growing food remains the main occupation for the majority who still know what it takes to grow food. And that is why, left alone, they can't starve but they are starving. Industrial economy can't absorb all able hands in the less developed countries [LDCs] in the present scenario of resource depletion. No economy can sustain 100% employment in modern industries; it has never happened in any non-war industrial economy. Small farms could have supported households everywhere yet independent farmers around the world are finding it hard to survive; LDCs are no exception.

Industrial farming method, especially in the US, is based on mono-cropping, use of hybrids and genetically engineered seeds, fertilizers and lethal pesticides, and fuel guzzling farm machinery. It is true that at current wage rate, an average American can buy a full meal with about an hours' wage but this 'cheap food' is actually horrendously costly.

Eating industrially grown foods actually means eating fossil fuels, eating less nutrition and more calories, falling ill more frequently, suffering from degenerative diseases, spewing greenhouse gases and dying young. [3] A wit summarized the present situation succinctly that for the first time in the history of civilization, parents will be burying their children. Why? Because the American citizens are chemically modified humans, now being destroyed at genetic level. Unnatural biological stresses intensify over space and time.

Basis of GFSA-2009

And yet, instead of addressing issues of nutrition and health, 'connecting the dots' as

Michael Pollan says, the US Congress is hell bent on introducing laws with global reach that would destroy the very basis of people's food security and food sovereignty. That is what the two pending legislations HR875 in the House of Representatives and S425 in the Senate, essentially seek. [4] The latest in the bouquet of legislations is the 'Global Food Security Act of 2009' with global implication.

Senator Lugar is peddling the bill on the basis of thirteen observations [Section II: Findings] including that over a billion people worldwide suffer from food insecurity, according to UN-World Food Programme 9.125 million people die each year from malnutrition related causes [25,000 per day], and 50% of food insecure people live in sub-Saharan region.

The macro-economic reason for intervention is agriculture can be powerful engine for growth. It further cites a UN-Hunger Task Force report that three out five small farmers suffer from hunger.

It also accepts that a 'diverse and secure food supply has health benefits including increasing child survival, improving cognitive and physical development of children, especially those under two years of age, increasing immune system function including resistance to HIV/AIDS, and improving human performance.'

Given these facts, it says that 'a comprehensive approach to long-term food security should encompass improvements in nutrition, education, agricultural infrastructure and productivity, finance and markets, safety net programs, job creation, household incomes, research and technology, and the environment.' [sic]

The bill hopes to mitigate global food insecurity with a Congressional appropriation of US\$7.5 billion over five years to 2014 [about \$1.5b per year] and assigns the responsibility to the US Agency for International Development [USAID] as the administrator.

China's agriculture budget this year is about US\$ 57.35 billion [391.7 billion yuan] and the Ministry of Agriculture in India spent over 2.35 billion dollars per year over 2002-07. They are still struggling to eliminate food insecurity in their respective countries.

Causes of food insecurity

The main causes for food insecurity and consequential widespread malnutrition in the developing countries is not inability to grow enough food. Farmers have been led to believe that: (i) they must earn cash to raise their standard of living; (ii) in order to earn cash they must produce for the market, (iii) earn cash income and (iv) use the cash to buy food and other services from enforced market economy. In the US a farmer is fortunate to get a net return of 5% on revenue; in the LDCs the entire household must work, including women and children, to earn a subsistence or starvation wage.

Farmers have been duped by seed, fertilizer and pesticide firms ever since the Green Revolution started. Market forces entice farmers to grow cash crops that are raw materials for food, feed and fibre industries controlled by global cartels. They are lured

by promises of higher income but it falls when there is bumper crop and it falls when yields drop. And there can be a variety of reasons, some manmade and market manipulated; others due to unforeseen circumstances like vagaries of local climatic conditions. So long as farmers remain fixated to the promises of cash income, there will be food insecurity in the LDCs and the GFSA can't mitigate that problem.

The second major reason is the huge subsidy that the US and European Commission provide to its biggest farmers [***not their own small farmers, please note***] that allows the cartel backed by their respective governments to manipulate global agricultural commodity prices exactly as they want.

'The top 10% of the biggest agricultural producers [in the USA] received more than 72% of its \$23 billion subsidy programs in 2005. Meanwhile, 60% of all US farmers do not collect any government subsidies.' [5]

Take rice, which is staple food for nearly 3.7 billion Asians. The US Government provided about one billion dollar subsidy to just three rice growers in the US over 1995 to 2006: \$526 million to Riceland Foods, \$314 million to Producers Rice Mill and \$146 million to Farmers Rice Cooperative.] [6]

Similarly the European Commission data show that in 2004, US\$36 billion (€28.2bn) of direct subsidies was paid out of a total Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) budget of \$58bn (€45.6bn) – and the **7% of Europe's primary food producers received more than 50% of these payments.** The biggest 2,460 farmers in Europe received on average \$667,000 (€524,000) each, totalling \$1.7bn (€1.3bn). [7]

The sops totaled over 140 billion dollars over 1995-06 in the US alone and covered cotton, canola, soy, sorghum, among other agriculture commodities.

To put this into perspective, there are an estimated 149 million farming households in India. If this sort of subsidy had been given by the Indian government, it would amount to US\$ 940 per household or 78 dollars per year per household or Rs 3900 per household per year at current exchange rate of one dollar to fifty rupees. Assuming each household spends a dollar a day on food, that amount would be sufficient to buy food for 76 days.

Simply put: American taxpayers could have fed 745 million Indians two meals a day for 76 days on the year, every year, for twelve years since 1995. That could itself have wiped out malnutrition of India's rural populace. Or, almost entirely in Sub-Saharan Africa.

That money could have prevented much misery in the US itself. 'About 11 percent of poor households in the US had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of money and other resources. Most food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid hunger, using a variety of coping strategies, *such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries or emergency kitchens...* But 3.5 percent of U.S. households were food insecure to the extent that one or more household members was hungry, at least some time during the year, because the household could not afford enough food.' [8]

Far more important is for the American taxpayers to realize that they could have had

access to nutritious food, all year round, for every man, woman and child if 140 billion dollars had been transferred to small independent farmers who grow nutrition and provide invaluable ecological services. Instead, their money was used to enrich a handful of commercial farmers, decimate third world farmers and depress agricultural investments worldwide.

This huge subsidy allows food cartels to lift wheat and rice and other food staples at a pittance to dominate global food market. The unsold surplus is palmed off to Government run schools in the US that is further destroying children's health.

Agriculture plays multi-functional role

Agriculture has always performed multifunctional role within traditional farming communities. They perform too many tasks, often synergistically that are not appreciated by the current official thinking that borders on lunacy.

IAASTD has acknowledged this fact and uses the term multifunctionality to 'express **the inescapable interconnectedness** of agriculture's different roles and functions. The concept of multifunctionality recognizes agriculture as a multi-output activity producing not only commodities (food, feed, fibers, agrofuels, medicinal products and ornamentals), but also non-commodity outputs such as environmental services, landscape amenities and cultural heritages.' [9] These services can't be measured in money terms, or even equated with the amount of money a farmer needs to buy food which he grows in the first place.

Unpaid environmental services of small farmers

Industrial agriculture compares efficiency of land use solely in terms of crop yield, NEVER ever in terms of the wider environmental services of the small holder or peasant. The environmental services of the peasantries include: soil management, prevention of erosion, animal husbandry, maintaining farm-level bio-diversity [vital for food security], water resource management, farm and village level rainwater harvesting [much of traditional methods have fallen into disuse because even small holders rely on diesel driven water pumps], maintaining common pool resources [forests and grassland], to name a few. The peasantries have never been adequately compensated in any country for the broader environmental services of traditional farming methods.

A proponent of **radical farming method** says, 'it takes commercial [aka industrial] agriculture 22,000 to 42,000 square feet to grow all the food for one person for one year, while bringing in large inputs from other areas. At the same time, commercial agricultural practices are causing the loss of approximately six pounds of soil for each pound of food produced.' [10] 'Modern mechanized agriculture contributes about 60% of anthropogenic emissions of CH₄ and about 50% of N₂O emissions. Inappropriate fertilization has led to eutrophication and large dead zones in a number of coastal areas, e.g., Gulf of Mexico, and some lakes, and inappropriate use of pesticides has led to groundwater pollution, and other effects, for example loss of biodiversity.' [11]

Had it not been for the poor, famished independent farmers of the less developed countries, the oceans would already have turned muddy and air un-breathable. But we

are all headed that way.

Growing nutrition

Although one of the core strategies of GFSA is to address malnutrition, the said bill is silent on growing nutrition.

About twenty years ago, a series of field trials were conducted in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia on very small kitchen gardens following a successful experiment carried out by Thailand Outreach Programs of Kasetsart University [Kamphaeng Saen, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand] from November 10, 1988 to February 15, 1989. The total garden area was 50 square metres or about 475 square feet and it met 80% of recommended daily allowance [RDA], a huge success in combating malnutrition. The total yield obtained from the garden under normal operating condition was 63.9 kg **without using radical methods**. The home garden supplied significant percentage of protein, calcium, iron, vitamins A and C of the RDA for a family of 5 and supplied vitamins A and C more than the family requirement. In terms of economic returns, growing vegetables proved to be profitable as well.

This sort of decentralized, household level initiative to grow nutrition has never been adequately supported by either FAO or CGIAR. [11] Even the WHO is more concerned about mass distribution of iron and folic acid tablets. Both the UNICEF and the UN-World Food Program have pushed mass produced corn and soy blend as supplements to combat malnutrition. Since it well known that much of corn and soy crops grown in the US are genetically modified and these foods can cause unknown illnesses, no one knows the long term consequences of these strategies.

There is a simple equation developed by Steve Solomon. He says health = nutrition/energy. Nutrition can be measured in terms of minerals, vitamins and protein and energy in terms of calories. If one eats equal proportion of nutrition and energy, health would equal 1. If one eats more energy [or calories] health would be fraction of the ideal 1. [12]

Senator Lugar and his friends in the Senate should seriously study the economic, social and humanitarian disaster in the United States itself from malnutrition. The US-FDA has forced unlabelled Genetically Engineered foods on them without proper biosafety assessment and they are eating nutrition deficient food. One doesn't need rocket science know the impact: just watch the explosive growth of obesity in the streets. Malnutrition is far more serious problem in the US than anywhere else and that is causing cancer, heart diseases, diabetes, and other degenerative diseases. [13] And that has happened because the US Government doesn't care for its own citizens' health. Can we, the rest of the world, rely on Lugar promise? A Luger on our dinner table appears to be a more environment friendly option, not this bill.

Mr. Lugar and other law makers in the US have been multi-functional at a different, perhaps more esoteric, level that has little to do with basic philosophy of growing food and living with honour and much personal freedom.

Notes

[1] Full draft of GFS, S384, here:

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s111-384>

[2] Sir Howard, A. 1943. 'An Agricultural Testament'; Oxford University Press; pages 11, 13 and 14.

[3] Michael Pollan in conversation with Bill Moyers.

<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11282008/watch.html>

[4] Shrivastava, A. 2009. For whom the bell tolls; www.Globalresearch.ca/

[5] http://farm.ewg.org/farm/top_recips.php?fips=00000&progcode=total&page=1

[6] Ibid

[7] http://www.oxfam.org/en/news/pressreleases2006/pr060711_wto

[8] <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/April05/DataFeature/>

[9] Executive Summary. 2008. International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development [IAASTD].

[10] Jeavons, J. 1995. Cultivating our garden, Context Institute, Page 34.

[11] IAASTD Summary for Decision Makers of the Global Report; April, 2008.

[12] UN-FAO is the specialized institution on agriculture issues. It maintains a vast data base on all agriculture related information. Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research [CGIAR] is jointly funded by many UN agencies including the industry.

[13] Solomon, S.; please do visit his e-library here:

www.soilandhealth.org/

Steve is a well know farmer and gardener and author of many books. His recent bestseller is 'Gardening when it counts: growing food in hard times.' The quote is from a personal discussion.

[14] WHO; Department of Measurement and Health Information; 2004

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