

## World hunger: not a matter of fate

By Samuel Nguiffo

Hunger riots have spread around the world, drawing the attention of the public and decision-makers about the reality of a new challenge for the planet. Hunger is nothing new. It has been rampant for several decades in various parts of the globe, and in Africa in particular. What is different and worrisome is the scope of the phenomenon, which has brought together world leaders for a summit at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome.

The current World Food Crisis, however, is not a surprise — French engineer in agronomy, sociologist and environmental politician, René Dumont, had predicted it in the early 1960s — at least for Africa. He based his prediction on the development approaches being followed by African leaders, whose decisions, more often than not, were based on the advice and support of bilateral and multilateral development agencies. In fact, agriculture had not been granted the place it deserved in the development strategies for the continent.

And so, the food crisis had been announced in advance. It has been building up, slowly but surely, through the errors or the naivety of our leaders and above all by the imposed worldview and policies of the global economy. Three elements can be lifted up to show that this crisis is structural and will continue:

1. We Africans have been pushed to produce what we don't eat and to eat what we don't produce. This structural change has taken place rather quickly over a period of about two decades. From my childhood, I recall that the consumption of rice and wheat was reserved for the wealthy classes. Others could afford it only now and then, usually during the holiday celebrations. The overwhelming majority of the people ate meals based on cassava root, corn, millet, sorghum, etc. Nowadays, rice and wheat are the main foodstuff for the middle class and the urban poor. The imports of these products weigh heavily on the balance of payments and add to Cameroon's trade deficit. But this is not the only consequence of the change in the food scene. By turning away from local products, urban consumers have unknowingly contributed to the destruction of traditional agriculture and thereby encouraged a rural exodus. New urban migrants have in their turn rushed into adopting the dominant eating habits, thereby increasing the demand for imported products ... And the farmers, to what have they in the meantime dedicated their productive efforts? Mainly to



growing coffee, cacao, cotton, bananas — all products destined for export. And when the world market prices for agricultural raw products plummeted in the late 1980s, the Cameroonian farmers were forced by the authorities to keep producing these plants even though they no longer brought in any income. It is truly ironic that now Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia provide most of the food for Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Ghana, when 40 years ago our African nations seemed better off than these countries.

2. Since the colonial era, in most of our countries, the State has pursued agricultural policies that favor large-scale plantations, which received priority in the allocation of land. Despite sometimes violent protests by affected farmers, the State has not found it necessary to change its politics of attracting investors to the agricultural sector. Profits from these crops are generally taken out of the country, while the social and ecological costs are borne by the producing area, which compromises sustainability. There are plenty of examples. The region of Mounjo, for example used to be the agricultural breadbasket for Douala, the largest city of Cameroon. Now, successive extensions of banana plantations have led to dispossession and total impoverishment of the region's farmers. In this case, the State seems to have once again chosen the side of the industrial companies of Dole and La Fruitière of Marseille, France.
3. Land and food products have become means, subject to the power of speculators, just like any other resources. The newest surge of hunger is a key illustration of this situation. The crisis is not due to food shortages, but to a price rise caused by inappropriate utilization of land and resources. How could we imagine that food needs and the production of bio/agrofuels would compete in the allocation of resources? How can it be allowed that for the sake of profit-making, speculators create artificial shortages of food products and put the lives of millions of people on this planet at risk?

It is no surprise that the solutions proposed by the world leaders meeting at the FAO's headquarters in Rome are unconvincing. The reality is that there is, among those in power, a global consensus on the need to give market rules as much free reign as possible, even if they are devastating for the poor. Clearly, without strong pressure from the grassroots to intervene, there is unfortunately little chance for a solution from the world's political decision-makers.

The global food crisis is only one of the manifestations of a much deeper ill, the ethical deficit of humanity, which has not yet been able to implement the notion of solidarity, kinship, and humanity.

*As the Director of RELUFA's member organization, the Center for the Environment and Development (CED), Mr. Samuel Nguiffo is a partner of the PC(USA) through the Joining Hands initiative. In 1999 Mr. Nguiffo was recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize, which is awarded each year to environmental campaigners from each of six continental regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Island Nations, North America and South/Central America.*