



Hungry for Change

The food system is failing the poorest people: the balance of power is tipped towards global companies – rather than families trying to put food on the table.



Pascale Palmer

Pascale Palmer is Head of UK news at CAFOD.

Every night more than 870 million people go to bed hungry. That number is equivalent of every person in America, Canada, Europe and Australia. Many people associate the idea of hunger with starving children in famine crises needing emergency food supplies. But for many families, and whole communities, living with hunger is not an emergency crisis but an everyday reality.

For those living with hunger, every aspect of their daily lives is affected – from children’s ability to concentrate in school, to their parents having enough strength to work. And of course, it affects people’s health and their ability to fight off disease.

Of those hungry people, 98 per cent live in developing countries, and almost two-thirds are women or girls. In Sub-Saharan Africa the figure shoots up to one in four people going hungry, and the recent financial crisis has pushed even more families towards starvation.

There are lots of reasons why people go hungry, but underpinning all of them is poverty and the lack of power that living in poverty brings. The poorest people in the world have no financial or physical buffers to cope with sudden disasters or ongoing problems, like climate change, conflict or displacement. This vulnerability to what is going on around them, almost always beyond their control, inevitably pushes people into extreme poverty where survival becomes the main focus. Whilst emergency aid is an important and often life-saving stop-gap, reducing and ending global hunger must focus on the way systems work that endanger the lives, livelihoods and welfare of the poorest people.

It is evident that the way food is grown, sold and shared out – whether through local or global food systems – is not working for millions of people. Our food system concentrates power in the hands of global companies, investors and governments, and sidelines small-scale producers and consumers across the world. With supply chains stretching across national boundaries, it is often difficult to know the real impact that global companies have on workers, farmers and consumers, and the influence they hold behind closed doors.

Small-scale farmers grow 50 per cent of the world’s food. But they face an increasing number of challenges such as the loss of land, poor water supplies and high energy prices. There is also a lack of access to markets and to resources such as finance and equipment.

Emily Mbithuka from Kenya has told CAFOD she finds it hard to find a good market for the crops she grows. The amount she produces is too small for larger traders to bother to travel the bumpy roads to her farm. So she sells to shopkeepers who then sell her produce on at triple the price. Emily said: ‘It’s difficult because they have control over the prices. We don’t have an option of where to take our produce. It’s like we’re being cheated. It would be good to get people to come here to our farm.’

Local and regional markets are packed with potential: they are where small farmers can bargain with customers to get a good price for their crops, whilst consumers can get local, affordable food. But lack of infrastructure, like roads, or lack of information about demand and prices, means that they often fail the people who need them most.

In vast tracts of Latin America, land that was once covered in forest is now used to farm soya and sugar for export or biofuels. Land is valuable and disputed and new mega-projects, such as mines and hydroelectric dams, are encroaching on the lands of indigenous people. Mario Nicácio, co-ordinator of the Indigenous Council of Roraima in Brazil, said: 'Our rights to our land are under constant threat ... Already because of climate change we have been experiencing food insecurity, ecological imbalances, and a reduction in the number of fish in rivers and lakes ... The government must listen to indigenous people before taking any decisions and respect their opinions.'

Water, essential for growing food, is also under threat. CAFOD's partners in Paraguay report that local communities there are afraid that what water sources there are have been contaminated by soya growers using agro-chemicals. In addition very often smallholders have to spend hours each day travelling to collect water to irrigate their land. When communities lack access and control over their land, water supply and other vital resources, such as seeds, they will struggle to grow enough to eat and sell.

Today, a few hundred companies dominate the global food market. By setting the rules along the food chains they govern, they get to determine where most costs fall and where most risks are borne.

Traditionally, farmers like Fidel Ramos in El Salvador have shared and saved seed, sowing different varieties to suit different conditions and climates. Fidel said: 'I believe strongly we shouldn't let our native seeds disappear, we should value what is ours. We share seeds between different communities, so that we can grow more varieties of crops.' This means that if one type of seed fails, all is not lost. Yet today, nearly 70 per cent of the global seed market is controlled by just 10 companies. The demands of shareholders and respect for community traditions are not necessarily compatible. Some governments and companies urge small-scale farmers to buy hybrid or genetically modified patented seeds that offer a higher yield. But this means farmers may have to buy new seeds every year, and often herbicides or pesticides too. This weakens local knowledge and the communities' control over food. Farmers' movements have protested against what they say is an attempt to control access to seeds and to reduce the variety of crops grown.

Around 70 per cent of the world's coffee is produced by smallholders. Ten million of them depend on coffee as their main source of income. They are at the mercy of prices controlled by the world market and by more powerful players. The coffee supply chain is dominated by a handful of multinational trading and roasting companies.

Coffee is a high value, high profit global commodity, but it's a risky market. Factors like weather conditions and disease can devastate a crop. And when small-scale farmers are not part of cooperatives, they can struggle to get information about prices and markets. As Colombian

coffee farmer Bolívar Palechor has found, this makes it hard for producers to predict their income and budget accordingly: 'My life depends on the fluctuating price of coffee,' he says. 'You make plans to send your child to school or buy new clothes, but if the coffee price is low, you're stuffed. It doesn't matter how hard you work.'

In an inherently unstable market, it's not fair that producers have to bear these risks while multi-million-pound profits are made at the other end of the supply chain. Workers in global supply chains can be very vulnerable. In Costa Rica, hundreds of workers growing bananas bought by British supermarkets were fired one day, only to be rehired the next on worse pay and conditions.

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Leading UK supermarkets have used their power over their suppliers to push down prices, transfer risk onto producers, and discourage them from selling to competitors. Agricultural workers, like the Costa Rican banana-growers, have paid the price – facing low wages and insecure jobs.

The factors that cause hunger are complex, but the right to food is not: it is everyone's.

CAFOD has launched its Hungry for Change campaign to demand the UK government makes urgent changes to the global food system that can put power back into people's hands. And last month CAFOD – along with every other major UK development agency – came together in our biggest joint campaign since Make Poverty History in 2005 to demand action on hunger.

It was the plight of hungry children that first inspired a group of British mothers to start the fundraising Lenten Fast Days which led to the foundation of CAFOD, and the argument they made to parishes on the second Fast Day in 1961 was both stark and simple: 'Millions of people in the world are hungry. They are hungry largely because the good fruits of the earth are enjoyed by too few. There is enough food for all – if only it could be fairly shared.'

The same is true today. There is still enough food for everyone, yet one in eight people go hungry each day. The way food is grown, sold and shared isn't working for the world's poorest people. Our food system concentrates power in the hands of global companies, investors and governments, sidelining small-scale producers and consumers across the world. The Hungry for Change campaign calls for empowering aid for small-scale farmers and checks on the power of global food companies. CAFOD knows, from years of campaigning experience, that if people unite locally, nationally and internationally, change can finally happen. For more information on the Hungry for Change and Enough Food for Everyone IF campaigns, please visit www.cafod.org.uk