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THE HIGH COST OF FOOD:

FAMILIAR REFRAINS IN A NEW CRISIS

In 2008, desperate cries for food have reached new fevered pitches because of the dramatically higher costs of basic foods, such as rice, wheat and corn (maize). The price of some food commodities have gone up more in one day than they have during entire years in the past. What is emerging to be the worst food crisis in a generation has ignited street riots, destabilized governments and is threatening hundreds of millions with new hunger. **Thus, the first priority must be to insist that all measures be taken that will result in food getting to those who most need it.**

Throughout Scripture, people having access to the food they need to live is a basic concern. Food is intimately connected with the life of faith—through prayer (“Give us this day our daily bread”), through diaconal sharing of food (Acts 6:1-6) and in worship (sharing the bread/body of Christ in Holy Communion). In the early church, the Eucharist was connected to redressing wrongs against the poor and the land in the food economy of imperial Rome. The Eucharist models an economy of sharing, rather than of greed; a way of living so that all can eat, i.e. to assure there will be food security for all.

In the first century context of the New Testament, frequent food shortages resulted from factors such as inclement weather, bad agricultural practices, too little supply for the demand, political changes, inadequate distribution and urban areas being too far from where the food was grown.¹ These factors lie behind many narratives and parables of Jesus. Matthew’s Gospel, for example, mentions different aspects of food production: large landowners, slaves, fishing, manual labor and basic foods of bread, fish and grain. Against the backdrop of Matthew’s overall critique of Rome’s imperial system, Jesus attacks the Roman-allied, Jerusalem-based leadership who probably controlled the food supply of those who were “harassed and helpless” (9:36). God’s purposes of abundant food for all (revealed in Jesus feeding the crowds in 14:31-21 and 15:32-39) were contrasted with Rome’s false claims of having provided for all.²

Today, many factors affecting the food crisis are similar. As the global population continues to grow in size and in the quality of their diet, there are greater pressures on the global food supply. Energy and fertilizer costs are escalating. Development in countries like China and India has brought increased demand for more and better food, especially for meat that requires more grain and water to produce. Climate change has contributed to intensified droughts, floods and other weather-related changes that dramatically affect food productivity.

At the same time, a significant proportion of some crops are now being grown not for food but for biofuels, in attempting to replace some of the dependency on ever-higher priced oil. Ironically, clearing land to grow biofuel may contribute to further climate change as well as food shortages. "Once food was just for people. Now rising demand for transport fuel...is sucking supply away from the world food market and increasing the upward pressure on prices."³

Already in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther recognized how much the availability of "daily bread" depends a whole array of factors, including political ones: "it is chiefly through (civil authorities and the government) that God provides us daily bread...For where dissension, strife and war prevail, there daily bread is already taken away or at least reduced."⁴ Zimbabwe, formerly seen as the breadbasket of Africa, is now one of the most tragic examples of this today.

Luther also went on to indict economic practices: "How much trouble there is now in the world simply on account of false coinage, yes, on account of daily exploitation and usury in public business, commerce, and labor on the part of those who wantonly oppress the poor and deprive them of their daily bread!"⁵

In this spirit, central attention today needs to be given to the ways in which financial speculation is one of the key factors driving up the cost of food.

The reason for food "shortages" is speculation in commodity futures following the collapse of the financial derivatives markets. Desperate for quick returns, dealers are taking trillions of dollars out of equities and mortgage bonds and ploughing them into food and raw materials. It's called the "commodities super-cycle" on Wall Street, and it is likely to cause starvation on an epic scale....The more prices rise, and big profits are made, the more others invest, hoping for big returns...The trouble is that if you are one of the 2.8 billion, almost half the world's population, who live on less than \$2 a day, you may pay for these profits with your life.⁶

As one international nonprofit agricultural organization asks: "Is this a price blip? No. A food shortage? Not that either. We are in a structural meltdown, the direct result of three decades of neoliberal globalization."⁷ Farmers produced an increased amount of grain in 2007. Enough food is being produced to feed the population, but it is being transformed from what feeds people into commodities for speculation and bargaining.

Policies of trade liberalization and structural adjustment imposed on poor countries by international financial institutions (World Bank and IMF), and various free trade and investment agreements (e.g. under the WTO) have dismantled tariffs and other means intended to protect local agricultural production. Forced to open their markets to agribusiness, speculators and subsidized food exports, countries have diverted fertile land away from serving local markets to producing global commodities for distant markets (e.g. African farmers produce flowers for Europe rather than more food for their own people). Consequently, about seventy percent of “developing” countries have become net importers of food.⁸

Significant changes are needed in agricultural policy so that small farmers around the world can gain access to land and grow the food they and their communities need to survive, rather than their being captive to international commodities markets and large corporations, who currently are reaping huge gains from this crisis. The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer and more desperate—the scandalous disparities against which the Old Testament prophets so often railed:

This is why the church’s prophetic voice especially needs to be heard, challenging the ways in which commodity markets and agribusinesses are benefitting from this crisis and working for policies and practices that will enable there to be greater justice for those who grow the food needed for life.

Obviously, especially those who do not have possibilities for growing their own food suffer under higher food prices, such as those living in urban areas, some of whom spend most of their money on food. But simply calling for lower food prices is not sufficient. Higher prices that are not due to speculation and other distortions in the market, but that result in improved income for those who actually farm the land, can be positive. This includes the vast majority of subsistence farmers who are served through World Service programs of the Lutheran World Federation, as well as millions of others in LWF member churches. Higher food prices may bring them more income, as well as reducing the trend of moving to urban areas in pursuit of a better livelihood. Fairer, more adequate earnings from agricultural work can help stabilize food production in low-income countries, and thus their food security. It could make production of food for local or regional markets more attractive, rather than contributing to climate change through long distance transportation of food.

Higher prices for food could also reduce the need for farmers (such as in Europe or the USA) to be dependent on governmental agricultural subsidies, which distort the market and put those in countries without government subsidies at a severe disadvantage. The current situation warrants renewed advocacy for ending such subsidies, especially those that do no benefit small farmers anyway.

Furthermore, the food supply could be improved if resources were devoted instead to improving agriculture productivity, through better techniques, seeds, fertilizers, or soil

stewardship. Farmers need to be able to adapt to increasingly volatile weather patterns related to climate change.

For us in the LWF, *communio* is lived out as those in member churches and field programs of this communion advocate and act out of a sense of relatedness, responsibility and accountability to others in the communion, and through them, to the rest of the created world.⁹ This becomes a real, embodied alternative to how policies and practices of neoliberalism are driving the current food crisis. The different factors involved in this crisis complicate what can be seen as easy solutions. But because we are interrelated we are pulled into more complex discussions of what is really going on, and how this can be redressed.

KAREN L. BLOOMQUIST

From your perspective what are the factors contributing to the higher costs of food in your area? Who suffers and who benefits? How can the injustices best be redressed?

¹ Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

³ Mark Lynas, "How the rich starved the world," *New Statesman*, 17 April 2008.

⁴ Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism" in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), para. 74, p. 450..

⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 84, p. 452.

⁶ Iain Macwhirter, "The trading frenzy that sent prices soaring," in *New Statesman*, 17 April 2008.

⁷ "Making a Killing from Hunger," in GRAIN (April 2008).

⁸ Katarina Wahlberg, "Are we approaching a global food crisis?" World Economy and Development in Brief, Global Policy Forum, 3 (March 2008).

⁹ Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Communion, Responsibility, Accountability: Responding as a Lutheran Communion to Neoliberal Globalization, LWF Documentation 50* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004), pp. 261, 262.

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