

EDITORIAL

One issue is returning to the social and political stage: world hunger. While the global food situation and the question of hunger were a major issue in debates on development policy in the 1970s, the problem has been successfully suppressed in the meantime, for which there are many different reasons. Following the end of the Cold War, for example, the importance of developing countries declined, so did the perception of their specific problems. The acceleration in globalisation which occurred in parallel caused a massive change in the structures of the global landscape of food supply, and the prevailing – until the international economic crisis, at least – neoliberal approach with its trust in the self-regulation of the markets meant that less and less thought was given to the needs for governments to shape matters and take responsibility.

The continuing (excessive) confidence in economic and technical solutions probably also plays a role. Is it not the case that more and more countries are progressing from the status of “developing countries” and being “promoted” to emerging nations? Isn’t prosperity increasing in many countries in the “Third World” and hunger declining? Won’t this development result in hunger soon dying out completely? Even the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving hunger in the world by 2015 was evidence of this optimism on the one hand – while promoting it on the other hand.

A specifically European experience can be added to this. Until just a few years ago, one of the main problems in our latitudes was overproduction. Buzz words such as “milk lakes” and “butter mountains” informed the debate for decades, TV cameras rolled as some of the yields of harvests were destroyed, and the prices of agricultural products fell despite huge state subsidies. This suggested that the problem with regard to food was not one of quantity but, at most, one of distribution.

Finally, it is also important to mention psychological reasons: in a society of affluence and plenty where excess is the order of the day, whose supermarket shelves are groaning under an in-

creasing abundance of luxury foods, in which lifestyle diseases are rife because of overeating and in which the proportion of obese children and adults is increasing to such a level that governments see themselves obliged to take counter-measures, famine and the starvation of millions of people represent a scandal that is difficult to tolerate. Thinking of the hunger in the world ruins people’s appetite and their enjoyment of their food. Looking away is easier.

But looking away is no longer an option. The continuing strong growth in population in many countries, particularly in Africa, the changes in eating behaviour, the increasing competition for agricultural land for the production of animal feed and renewable raw materials, and the impacts of climate change are raising the stakes. Achieving the Millennium Development Goal is an illusion as a billion people are starving, and the trend is upwards. There has been a gradual rise in awareness of the need for urgent action over the last few years.

In terms of technology assessment and systems analysis the issue of the global food situation is a major challenge, not only because of the urgency involved, but also because of its complexity. The systemic interconnectedness of the issue from the role of global corporations, governments and civil society players, to consumer behaviour, the importance of incentives and regulatory structures, and the potential for research and development to play at least some part in resolving the problems are just some of the aspects which will be addressed here.

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