

THE RIGHT TO FOOD

Delegates at the recent UN conference on food and agriculture were confronted with food shortages and deep divisions over the causes and possible solutions to hunger. Mark Ritchie reports on the possibilities arising at the Rome summit.

THE RECENT UN FOOD SUMMIT IN ROME MET AT A time when more than 800 million people are going hungry and there is less than a two-month stock of grain on hand. Food prices are likely to double or triple again next summer due to shortages, repeating last summer's price increases. As of 1990, increases in grain harvests and fish catches are no longer keeping up with population growth, according to Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute. A doubling of the world population since 1950, a shift toward the consumption of meat in Asia, and a conversion of cropland to non-farm uses are all contributing to a food crunch. Moreover fisheries throughout the world are being fished at or beyond capacity and irrigated areas may actually be shrinking.

Mark Ritchie, president of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade, attended the Food Summit and sent this report.

Hunger, like slavery, is a human rights violation and must be abolished

When the head of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization called for a world summit on food and hunger nearly two years ago, no one could have predicted last summer's grain shortage, which drove prices to the highest level in 25 years, nor the terrible war and resulting starvation in Zaire and Rwanda. Both events were on the minds of many representing government delegates and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at the World Food Summit, reminding everyone of the unfulfilled promises of previous global gatherings on food. One of the most quoted statements in Rome was US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's 1974 World Food Conference promise that within

ten years no person would go to bed hungry.

Like other global meetings sponsored by the United Nations, this event had both an official summit and a forum for NGOs. Analysis of the documents and speeches from both the official summit and the NGO forum reveals important areas of agreement between governments and NGOs, and some areas of strong disagreement.

Agreements

The most important area of agreement was the strong expression of the need to start discussing the issue of hunger in the context of human rights. In fact, the lone voice in opposition to this view was the United States government which single-handedly blocked insertion of this consensus position into the final official document. The head of the US delegation, Melinda Kimball, went so far as to say that the recently enacted Welfare Reform Law, which President Clinton supported, would not support the idea of food security as a human right. The US government opposed including this concept in the official Summit declaration, fearing that it would subject the US to human rights violation scrutiny.

But apart from the US government, there was incredible consensus among governments and NGOs for making "the human right to food" the chief demand and commitment to come out of the Summit. In the official Plan of Action, for example, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights was given the task of pulling together all of the global agencies to tackle the implementation of the Right to Food. In his speech to the NGO Forum, the chair

of FAO's Food Security Committee – Chile's ambassador to FAO – described the incredible level of support for making the Right to Food the central demand of a global campaign involving both governments and NGOs. At the NGO session, workshops and discussions on the Right to Food were extremely well attended, ending with agreement on a global campaign.

Disagreements

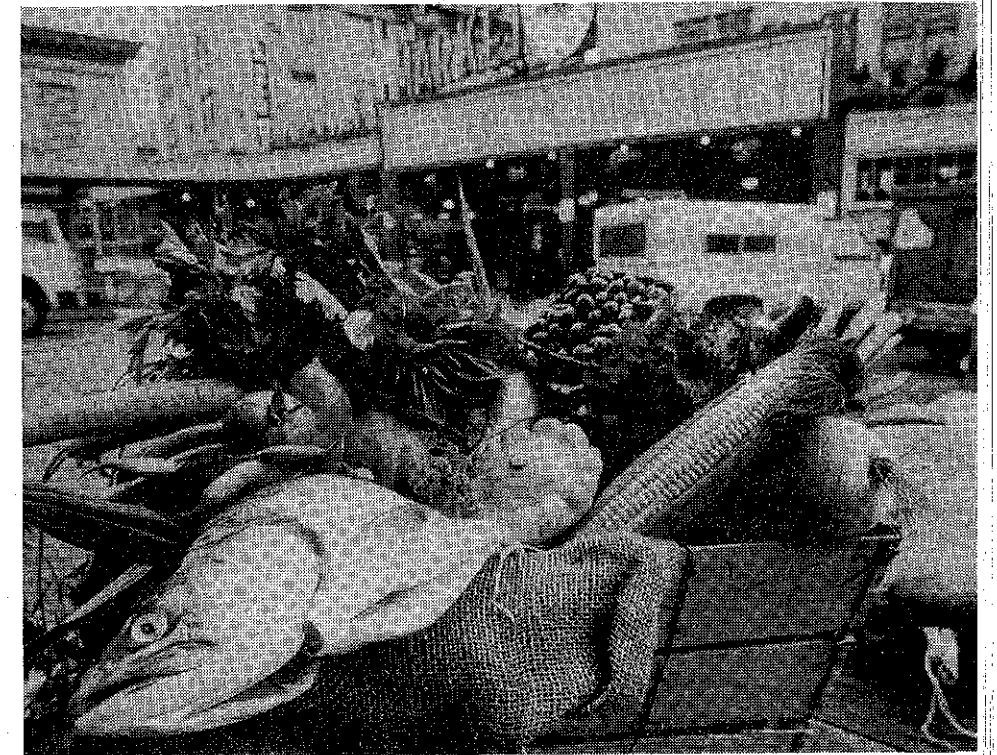
The most glaring disagreements between governments and NGOs was on the specifics of what to do about hunger and shortages. Most governments still think of hunger as a production shortfall problem, and therefore their final recommendations are mostly old-fashioned ideas about how to boost production. The US government, for example, argued that the solution to the problem of hunger is more intensive production (using more biotechnology, pesticides, artificial fertilizers, irrigation, etc.), greater freedom for the transnational food corporations, and faster de-regulation (liberalization) of food trade.

In contrast, the NGOs stated in many different venues and situations that these three exact same elements – chemical and energy-intensive industrialized farming, the lack of regulation of transnationals, and de-regulated or liberalized trade – are the causes of many of the current problems. The NGOs called for reform of domestic and international policies to reduce the industrialization of farming, to regulate inappropriate behavior of transnationals, and to base food trade on the principles of food security, not neo-liberal trade theory.

What next?

There is no near-term accommodation that can solve or even paper over the differences. There is an almost religious fervor to US government pronouncements about the need to "unleash the corporations and technology," while most NGOs and other governments believe that this can only make matters worse. But there is some room to maneuver by building upon the level of agreement on promising proposals such as a Code of Conduct on the Right to Food, and the negotiation of a Convention on Sustainable Food Security. The Code of Conduct would cover all actors from NGOs and global corporations, to national governments and

the global lending institutions like the World Bank. The momentum from this initiative can help move toward a broader approach offered by the Convention based firmly in global cooperation, making



food security, not more de-regulated trade, the highest priority on the international agenda.

Latin American governments are continuing to push the Right to Food agenda at the official level, while a working group of NGOs has been formed out of the Rome Summit to continue to move this agenda into the broader society. Specific campaign plans are to be developed to promote both the Code of Conduct and the Convention on Sustainable Food Security. This continued momentum is truly cause for hope. Hunger, like slavery, is a human rights violation and must be abolished. The creation of hunger by governments (or by the multilateral institutions they create) is unacceptable and must be challenged at every opportunity.

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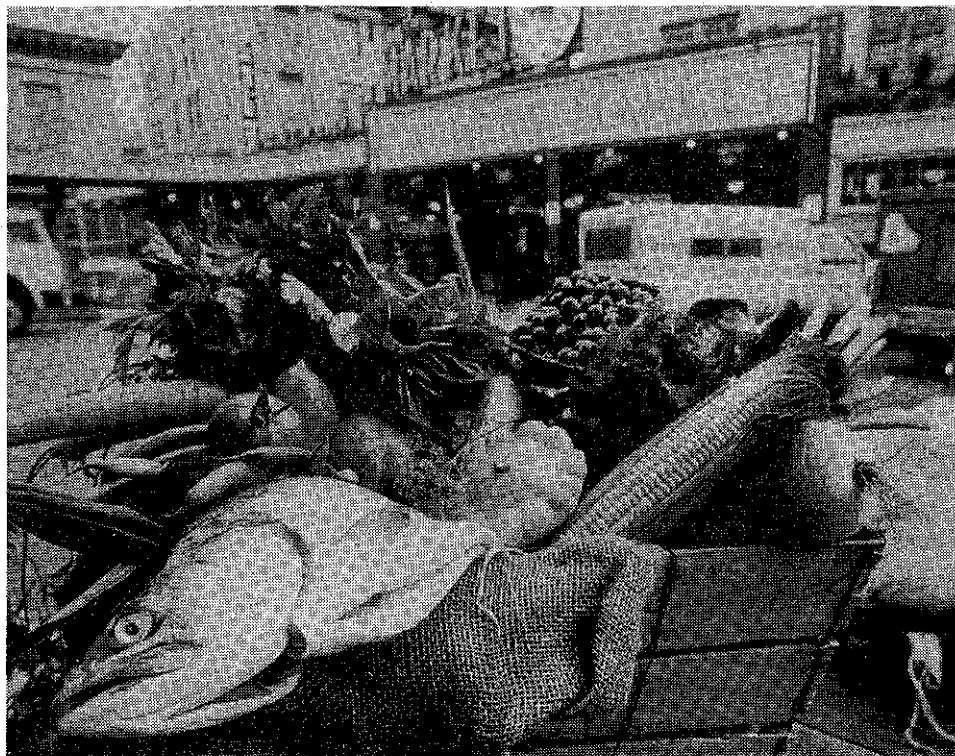
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