

## **POISONED FOOD AND WORLD HUNGER: THE POOR ARE FEEDING THE RICH**

Thank you so much for the invitation to speak to you here on World Food Day. As most of you know I am always glad to be here in Dublin, together with my very close friend Gert Bastian. The theme of this year's meeting is "Food for the Future." I would like to address the issue of poisoned food and world hunger, and the issue of the poor feeding the rich.

Let me begin by stating a few of our Green principles. First of all, the Green Parties in Europe are trying to use a new type of power--a counterpower from below, the power of nonviolent change and nonviolent transformation, a power common to all, to be used by all and for all. "Power over" is to be replaced by "shared power," by "the power to do things," by the discovery of our own strength as opposed to a passive receiving of power exercised by others, often in our name. It is not a power to dominate, nor power to terrorise or oppress, but the power of nonviolent change. Eastern European authors, writers, and dissidents have expressed it better with the term "anti-politics"--anti-politics as a moral force. The subject of poisoned food and world hunger is a subject that concerns "power over," the way in which our method of politics and economics has kept people oppressed, hungry, and dying. The Green society we strive for is based on ecological principles that can mediate humanity's relationship with nature. This means first and foremost searching for a soft and decentralised energy system; for soft,

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*Nonviolence Speaks to Power*

decentralised technologies; and for methods of true codetermination and self-determination moving away from monolithic modes of production and monolithic technology. This also has to do with poisoned food and world hunger. At the present time, the five hundred largest industrial corporations control nearly one trillion dollars in corporate assets in the United States. The six hundred largest multinational corporations will control over 40 percent of planetary production by the end of this decade. All of this has to do with poisoned food and world hunger.

We have always been in favor of radically dismantling all those branches of industry which are hazardous to life--above all, the nuclear, the chemical, and of course, the defence industries. But again, these industries also have to do with poisoned food and world hunger. Here in the West we are overproducing and overconsuming and then dumping our highly poisonous, hazardous wastes and also our food wastes in developing countries! Just think about the radioactive milk powder, made radioactive through the Chernobyl disaster and then given away to Third World countries! And think about the Lactogen Nestle scandal--the milk powder that is being mixed with dirty water causing the deaths of many thousands of African children.

We must learn that we can be an agent of change, that we are part of the problem and that together we are also part of the solution. The actual danger is not "out there." The real danger as well as potential solutions lie within us. Our personal behavior is just about the only thing in this world over which we have 100 percent control and so we must take responsibility for it.

This week, the magazine *Der Stern* in the Federal Republic of Germany published a leading article about our daily food. It is quite strange to read that, on the one hand, millions and millions of women are trying to lose weight through Jane Fonda diets, while on the other hand, the European Community countries are importing grain to feed cows and other animals of which we have far too many and which produce far too much

*Poisoned Food and World Hunger*

meat. We eat too much meat, thereby getting ill, and we also end up eating poisonous and contaminated food which makes us even more sick, and the vicious cycle begins all over again!

But what has made me most angry is that fruit and vegetable pesticides can cause childhood cancer. A private environmental group in Washington, D.C., has recently reported that preschool children are consuming cancer-causing chemicals in fruit and vegetables at levels that expose them to health risks many times greater than the government considers safe. The National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), a group specialising in environmental and health matters, has concluded that the typical preschooler receives four times greater exposure on average than adult women to eight carcinogenic pesticides the group evaluated and that in some cases the exposure is as much as eighteen times that of adults. "Our children are being harmed by the very fruits and vegetables we tell them will make them grow up healthy and strong," concludes this report! The group's conclusions were based on fruit and vegetable consumption figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and on levels of pesticide residues found in twenty-seven types of fruits and vegetables.

Even more disgusting is the news that radioactive milk powder has ended up in Third World countries, for example in Africa, in El Salvador, in Thailand, and in Jamaica, as well as other areas of the world. The milk powder, made radioactive by the Chernobyl tragedy, was packed in twenty-five kilogramme bags, without labels and without any information about where it came from. This radioactive milk powder was then given to the children, the poorest of the poor, the weakest of the weak, those suffering the most from hunger. One could cynically call it a training programme for the "survival of the fittest." "For free distribution," the label reads, and children in the Sudan and other areas receive this milk powder, not realising the deadly mixture that they are going to drink. This type of European Community food aid is simply criminal! All the figures are correct that up to 20 percent of EC milk production was radioactively

contaminated in 1986. This means that ten to twenty million tonnes of radioactive milk powder went to Third World countries and this is not counting the contaminated grain and the meat that also went there. This is a form of racism! Let me cite the example of Jamaica. Jamaica wanted to return five hundred tons of contaminated milk powder. It did not want to accept them. The EC representative, K. Billerbeck, told them that Jamaica would not get any more EC food aid in the future if it refused the milk powder! He told them the levels of radioactivity were acceptable to all Europeans. This was of course totally untrue. But who cares about levels of radiation? Who cares about levels of radiation for African children when we here do not even care about them for those children living near Sellafield or other nuclear reactors?

In the case of Germany, one need only ask our German embassies abroad how the milk powder was distributed. Many of those in so-called high places know quite well what crimes have been committed in the name of food aid, so-called food aid gifts of the European Community, or through exports done through commercial companies.

But let me return again to the pesticides right here in Europe. The food system is unnecessarily contaminated and children would be in the line of fire even if Chernobyl had never taken place and even if we did not have any other nuclear and chemical industries. Let me just cite one figure: of the 560 million pounds of herbicides and fungicides used by American farmers annually, 375 million pounds are probably or possibly carcinogenic, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Under one scenario, these chemicals may cause an extra 1.4 million cases of cancer among Americans over their lifetimes. Children are particularly victimised by these compounds. A child has some seventy years of life ahead--seventy years to ingest pesticides and seventy years for carcinogens to exert their tragic effects. Children are also at heightened risk because their neurological, digestive, and other systems are still forming. Do we in Europe in fact know what

*Poisoned Food and World Hunger*

producers of food are the most diligent about cleaning up their food supplies? Do we know what food producers use what types of ingredients, for example, in baby food? I am reminded here of the EPA plans to ban alar, a chemical that regulates the growth of apples. The agency announced that the industry uses alar on 5 percent of U.S. apples. But the agency decided to postpone action for at least eighteen months while health tests were being completed. The most potent carcinogen cited in the report by the NRDC is called UDMH, a by-product of the chemical alar. For children who are heavy consumers of foods contaminated by UDMH (the poison emerges during processing of apples in juices and sauce), the study predicts cancer risks of one in eleven hundred. This example shows clearly that the EPA and other such agencies ignore childhood consumption patterns when regulating pesticides. Preschool children are being exposed to intolerable risks at a time when they are most susceptible to danger from toxic chemicals.

The question remains open--what can we eat? I believe we can have no faith in our governments' assuring us that our food is safe. To this day, no one within the EC seems to know precisely what hazards many common pesticides may pose to humans. Fifty thousand pesticide products in six hundred chemical categories are in use today. After working within the European Community for over ten years I can well tell you how, in fact, the EC deals with the chemical lobby, how it deals with big food companies and food chains. It hardly deals with them at all! It often bows to their lobbying pressure. I myself have experienced this on the subject of asbestos, a carcinogenic substance that should have been banned long ago!

The question has also arisen as to how easy it is for a terrorist to inject something into a few crates of fruit on the docks, in the fields, or on boats. We know of the lacing of oranges in France and West Germany with mercury in 1978 and we know of injecting blue die into grapefruits in Rome. In 1984, Japanese terrorists threatened to place cyanide-laced chocolates

on the shelves in an attempt to extort money from a candy company.

Let me add that in general our food industry officials and public health authorities worry far more about micro-biological threats to the food supply than chemical residues. Yet how many times have our parliaments in Western Europe rejected attempts to mandate safety levels and sampling programmes, on account, in part, of industry pressure.

Even more frightening, studies indicate that right from the day babies begin to suckle, they are taking in pesticides deposited in breast milk. Ready-made baby foods were also contaminated, although thankfully now several baby food companies like Gerber and Beech-Nut are cleaning up their food supply! Neither of these two companies, for example, accepts apples treated with alar.

Recently, after having been in India, I was told that Indian food is laced with some of the highest amounts of toxic pesticide residues in the world. In Uttar Pradesh, 250 people suffered from sudden convulsive seizures. They complained of noises, saw flashes of coloured light, and suffered from headaches. The reason: farmers in this area had ignorantly been using BHC (benzene hexachloride) to preserve their food grain. In another area, three hundred people were struck by a mysterious crippling attack of arthritis. Studies indicated that these people had switched to eating crabs from nearby fields after their wages were cut. Since the fields were sprayed regularly with pesticides, the crabs ingested large doses of toxins. The people eating the pesticides were poisoned by them as well. Let me quote another figure for India: pesticide use has risen tenfold in just three decades and is expected to pass eighty thousand tonnes this year. India is now the largest manufacturer as well as consumer of pesticides in South Asia. There are over 131 different types of pesticides marketed under 203 different formulations by over 350 companies in India. In 1984 the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) analysed 1,500

*Poisoned Food and World Hunger*

samples of cereals, oil, and milk from different parts of India. The finding: almost all the samples were contaminated with DDT and BHC. Almost all the samples also had exceeded the World Health Organization (WHO) safety limits. There has been no real effort at the governmental level either here or in Third World countries to work out the risk from pesticide residues to the general population.

The rise in Green consciousness has meant that the consumer now truly desires clean, pesticide-free, and hormone-free food. Much of the food we eat is responsible directly or indirectly for environmental pollution because many methods of agriculture are energy-intensive and use a lot of pesticides and artificial fertilizers. Food processing also means that much of the food contains chemical additives and is hardly nutritious. Now we must also be fearful that more and more food is being irradiated. It is far too easy to preach that organic foods ought to become a daily part of our diet. It is difficult for those who do not live near a biological food store or a biological farm.

We must demand that the labelling include all additives with suspect additives highlighted. We must make sure that all those which show evidence of toxicity be banned! And there must be severe restrictions on additives which are suspect.

Irradiation of food is now officially permitted under EC law. I am glad that in Ireland there is opposition to food irradiation. I see that the Irish Green Party and Labour Party are campaigning to ban food irradiation. I hope the Irish government will act responsibly and ban irradiated food. Health hazards to consumers have been clearly established and we all know that irradiation causes new chemical reactions which are unknown and untested. The high radiation levels permitted under the EC directive give cause for real concern. The directive forms part of the legislation related to the so-called Single Market after 1992 which will allow the free movement of goods and services. Food irradiation is permitted already in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, and now the British government

wants the ban against it removed. Because of insufficient labelling, most of us have already eaten irradiated food which has been imported.

Let me now turn to the hazards of the affluent diet. Among Westerners, fats have accounted for an increasing proportion of total caloric intake over the last century. Because we eat more meat and dairy products, we now consume more fat than in any previous period. And we know by now that a high intake of saturated fats, supplied mainly by animal products, may promote cardiovascular problems and cancers.

In the United States 10 to 20 percent of all children and 40 to 50 percent of the middle-aged are overweight. So while the newspapers on the one hand fill the women's pages with crash diets to be undertaken at any age and to be effective in a short time, the other pages of those newspapers are full of daily reports about increasing world hunger! Central to all of this is an insane, corrupt, and immoral EC agricultural policy--an agricultural policy which takes away the grains so desperately needed in Third World countries to import them to feed our overfed cattle. In turn we have silos filled with excess grain, excess butter, excess vegetables and fruit, and excess meat.

The vicious cycles are many: *in fact, the poor are feeding the rich*; in fact, the rich are living off the poor countries they exploit! Ironically, the conventional strategy of development agencies in many Third World governments--to encourage greater exports--only makes matters worse. Increased exports from Third World countries only benefit the international agribusiness which dominates Third World agricultural production and maintains the large landholders there. But it will not feed hungry Africans. The question, "What can poor countries do to become self-sufficient?" requires a small but critical change to "What can rich countries do to become self-sufficient?" (*International Herald Tribune*, July 19, 1985) There are so many myths about world hunger, myths which concern us directly.

*Poisoned Food and World Hunger*

The unequal distribution of food can be described as world cannibalism! There is really no such thing as world hunger, but only the hunger of particular areas and particular social groups. The total food resources available in the world would be perfectly adequate to feed everyone properly if they were only fairly distributed. We need only look at the terrible complications in the Soviet Union when trying to bring home the harvest of this year! Seen over the long term, total food production in the world has defied Malthus's predictions that it could not keep up with population growth. The "world food problem" is not so much one of overall production as one of local production and above all of distribution. The world's food supply is not shared in such a way as to maximise human welfare. The distribution is just as unequal, unjust, and iniquitous as that of every other element in life. Food inequality is the most damaging form of all inequality. It is inequality not in material possessions but in human flesh and bones (Paul Harrison, *Inside the Third World*).

Protein is distributed just as unevenly. The overconsumption of the developed countries is intimately linked with the underconsumption of the Third World. One man's heart attack is another man's malnutrition. Much of the best land that should be used for domestic food production in the developing countries is growing cash crops for the West: five of the most common--sugar, tobacco, coffee, cocoa, and tea--are not doing the West much good either.

Milk production is not wrong in itself. There are many agriculturally marginal areas that are fit for little else. But in Latin America cattle are being raised on prime agricultural land for export to the West or consumption by local elites. Cereals can give five times as much protein per acre. And cows do not only eat grass. A large proportion of the world's protein supplies--grains, soy beans, and other products--is fed to them. In the United States alone, some 118 million tonnes of grain and soy beans were consumed in 1971 to produce only twenty million tonnes of meat. In 1972, 43 percent of the world's cereal

production was used as feed for livestock, whose meat was consumed largely in the West.

One of the saddest aspects of this business is the massive protein consumption of household pets in the West. Britain's six million dogs and five million cats consume around one and a half million tonnes of food a year. Most of that is of animal origin. The equivalent in grain would be enough to feed the entire population of Egypt.

And we realise that we do not benefit from this dietary bonanza. Indeed, this is also killing us. Excess consumption of calories leads to obesity, which increases the likelihood of death from heart disease. Thus as Paul Harrison has written in *Inside the Third World*: "The rich of the world are eating themselves as well as the poor!" Unless the distribution of food is changed, hunger will go on spreading at the same time as food production rises.

The criminal maldistribution of the world's food resources is possible because income is so inequitably distributed. What the poor need, they do not get, unless they can pay for it. The world food market will not match food supply with real human needs until world incomes are more equally distributed.

There are so many myths concerning hunger. One is that famine stalks the continents because of climatic changes. Of course, global exploitation of the environment, the degradation of the soil, oceans, and rivers brings on even more poverty and thereby malnutrition and hunger. But we must also take a look at the type of agricultural practices in the Third World. Bad agricultural practices, for example, do not make good use of rainfall. We must, of course, also realise the tragic consequences of deforestation. Lack of forest was a factor in Ethiopia's recent famines. Half of Ethiopia loses an estimated two thousand tonnes of topsoil per square kilometer every year. It is true "that food will last as long as forests do," but we must ask why people in the Third World are forced to cut down their own forests. Forced by us in the West! Just look at the debt crisis and you

*Poisoned Food and World Hunger*

will know the answer. Another myth is that Africa cannot feed itself. As recently as 1970, Africa was self-sufficient in food. The rich soils of Chad alone, with the right techniques and proper distribution, could feed the entire Sahel. Let me also say something about the myth that Africa is overwhelmed by population growth. In some countries, yes, the rates of population growth are faster than anywhere else in the world, yet Africa as a whole is not overpopulated. The average population density is sixteen people per square kilometre compared with one hundred per square kilometre for China and twenty-five for India. Let me also add something about the myth that most aid has been spent on agricultural development. For example, billions of dollars of aid have been poured in to the Sahel zone. But only 4 percent of the aid was used to grow rain-fed crops and only 1.5 percent on tree planting or soil and water conservation.

Malnutrition is not the result of inadequate world food production. It is the result of poverty for which we in the West are responsible, of growth inequality in the distribution of income and of land, and of government bias against the poor resulting in the lack of provision of clean water and sanitation which could prevent so much malnutrition.

The recent United Nations Summit on Children and their Needs was unable to answer the questions I have tried to pose here. We must begin to answer these on our own by becoming critical consumers, critical taxpayers, and critical citizens in general! We must stop abusing the Earth. This means that we must point the finger first at ourselves, and we must force our governments to end the exploitation of the Third World. This calls for significant and radical changes in our lifestyles, politics, and economics. It means also creating a climate for sustainable development and the Gandhian concept of self-supporting communities.