

The right to food security

It is odd that, even though they constitute one of the most enduring and serious problems faced by humanity, issues relating to food, nutrition, health, civil rights and the duties and obligations of the state and society have only come to figure prominently in public policy-making in the last half century. In fact, it was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that the still nebulous and ill-defined issue of widespread malnutrition found its way onto the agenda of political leaders, having hitherto been the subject of biological, economic, social, historical, cultural, religious and ethical studies relating to human development.

We owe the fact that awareness was raised and governments and society spurred into action across the globe largely to the inspiration provided by two books by a Brazilian doctor called Josué de Castro: *The Geography of Hunger* (1946) and *The Geopolitics of Hunger* (1951). These books have been translated into 25 languages and gone through dozens of reprints and re-editions, along with scores of other books by the same author. This is because of Josué de Castro's pioneering role in breaking the conspiracy of silence that made hunger a taboo subject and thereby stifled debate and hampered the task of taking action to straighten out the tortuous paths that human history has taken in the realms of economics, politics, anthropology, sociology, the study of disease, morality, religious practice, and ecological and geographical determinism.

Geography and religion were once touted as the main a priori excuses for human problems. There were supposedly natural and supernatural explanations for the unequal distribution of wealth into clusters of opulence and poverty, and for the perverse exploitation of workers and natural resources, which ranged from the absurdity of slavery to the dissimulation used to extract the maximum surplus value by perpetuating insalubrious working conditions, low wages, and unemployment and under-employment, as a way of providing a constant potential reserve army of workers, available to perform tasks that are shunned by the majority of the workforce. This is the historical backcloth to hunger in Brazil and around the world, which Josué de Castro, on an international scale, and Nelson Chaves and others, in Brazil, denounced through the scientific authority of their studies and the persistence of their political activism.

The aim of these preliminary observations is to underline Brazil's history as a fore-runner in the worldwide struggle against hunger and malnutrition. In fact, apart from the vicissitudes of historical circumstances, such as the emergence of the League of Nations, after the First World War and the United Nations at the end of World War II, there is a continuous line of thought and political action favoring the concept of civil rights and duties and its application. It is fair to say that, although it often strayed far from the way, the 20th century was the Age of Human Rights, ranging from the most universal to the most specific, such as the rights of women, children, adolescents, workers, ethnic minorities, and freedom of religion and the right to worship. It may be that, in spite of all the affirmations to the contrary, the civil right that has most consistently been denied is the right to food security and adequate nutrition, given that billions of people are still at risk of or suffer from the concrete manifestations of functional or morphological abnormalities related to acute or chronic malnutrition. This is not only the result of government incompetence or the evils of some kinds of society; these are sins that form part of the very structure of civilization itself.

In light of this, the recent proclamation, after seven years going through various consultative committees and plenary rulings in the Senate, to the effect that, according to the Brazilian Constitution, the right to food security is a basic human right, represents a major historical breakthrough. The so-called PEC 047/2003 (the year in which formal discussion of the Constitutional Amendment Bill began in the Brazilian Senate) places food security, alongside education, health, employment, housing, leisure, unemployment benefit, as a social right, recognized by the Constitution, thereby assuring each and every Brazilian citizen that his or her biological needs shall be taken care of, every single day, wherever they may reside, and under whatsoever circumstances, from cradle to grave. This means that, as a last resort, when structural or temporary features of the economic and social process prove unable to uphold this right, the public authorities must be judicially held accountable for providing it.

It took seven years for a single phrase (food security) to be incorporated into Article 6 of the Federal Cons-

titution, but this was nevertheless an enormous breakthrough, in so far as it established that this is an obligation of the state and not subject to the whims of any particular government or a political party's policy agenda. It should be added that this is no magic fiat that, from one moment to the next, will put healthy food on everyone's table. However, by making food security an obligation of the state, in its role as representative of society, and not as an occasional philanthropic public service, this right leads to the need for economic, social, ecological, educational and cultural policies, and, in the last (or perhaps the first) analysis for clear ethical guidelines.

More than crowning a rich history of struggle against hunger and the rewarding experience of two terms of a government that has stood up to the issue of food insecurity in Brazil, the PEC 47 proclaims to the world this country's lasting commitment to one of the most fundamental of all human rights, the right to food security, as a basic condition of life itself.

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