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Subscription rates (1 year, 2 issues):

New Zealand	NZ\$50 (institution)	\$25 (individual)
South Pacific/Australia		A\$50 (institution)
A\$25 or NZ\$30 (individual)		
Rest of world	£25, US\$40	£12.50, US\$20
	or NZ\$60 (institution)	or NZ\$30 (individual)

Postage included for all subscriptions.

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Let them eat cars.... OR culture change?

Over most of the time human societies have existed, for around four to five thousand years, people nourished themselves with highly productive food systems in ways which maintained the health of ecosystems over the ages. The great success of these sustainable agroecology systems over millennia is little known or celebrated today, yet they existed worldwide, stretching across Mexico, South America, India, Africa, China, Sri Lanka and the Pacific.

Pacific Islands had their rich agrobiodiversity traditions too, which served the people of the Pacific well for thousands of years as Professor R. Thaman of University of the South Pacific, in Fiji has documented (*Pacific Ecologist* issues 15/16). Agroforestry, he reported, incorporates trees and forests within an agricultural system to ensure short and long-term productivity, cultural utility and ecological stability, while sustainably increasing the land's overall yield. These local food systems utilised worldwide were very diverse, complex, highly productive and sophisticated providing cultures with food, water, fibre, medicine, energy and wood.

But with the imposition of the western 'green revolution' (GR) from the 1960s, through powerful international institutions like the World Bank, agriculture was transformed from being an activity which provided nutritious food for people while sustaining natural resources into being an activity aimed at producing agricultural commodities for profit, in ways that harmed nature. Vandana Shiva in her book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology & Survival in India*, reports that within 20 years of the 'green revolution,' this vital knowledge of peasant and women farmers, who were the world's original food producers, was marginalised, dismissed as unscientific and worthless (p 31).

In assessing the food and hunger crisis which now engulfs the world, it's encouraging to know of this triumph of agriculture over thousands of years. However it's difficult not to wonder at the arrogance of the western 'experts' who could dismiss as worthless such a profound treasury of knowledge which sustained millions of people over many centuries. We now know that the costs to nature over just 50 years of the GR experiment are high. These include poisoning the web of life, e.g bees (p 37), with use of toxic pesticides (which have caused more pests to proliferate), soil erosion through using chemical fertilisers, destruction of biodiverse forests and gardens with all their resilience and their replacement by monocrop plantations, destruction of water resources through logging biodiverse forests and creation of large dams, etc. Worldwide 1.9 billion hectares of land are now significantly degraded, soils are less fertile, erosion has greatly increased, and the degradation has brought poor crop yields, abandoned land and deforestation, according to the important International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science & Technology report in 2008.



Because of its reliance on finite fossil fuels, and toxic monocultures, GR agriculture contributes significantly to climate change and this reliance also makes it prone to increasing costs as finite fossil fuels are depleted.

The food/fuel/hunger/financial/climate crisis which now confronts us is a many headed monster created by wealthy western consumer societies now being followed in Asia. Food prices rise, causing hunger worldwide as oil prices rise, also because of the unstable, speculation-driven financial system which is now gambling on food crops. 'People die from hunger while the banks make a killing,' Deborah Doane says (p 5). Poverty, unemployment and hunger is rampant worldwide in rich and poor countries. Even here in NZ children are going to school hungry and we have significant poverty levels (p 27). The Millennium Development goals to halve poverty by 2015 will not be achieved, the statistics are shocking. Over half the world is hungry with 1.4 billion living on less than US\$1.25 daily, with 700 million more since the 2008 food crisis, and another 3 billion people live on less than US\$2 daily, according to a 2007 World Bank report.

A major factor contributing directly to the food/hunger crisis is the free-market, export-driven policies promulgated forcefully to the third world, by the World Bank, World Trade Organisation and IMF. These policies have destroyed food self-sufficiency throughout Africa, Latin America and Asia, where most of the world's people live, turning countries that were formerly food exporters into food importers (p 10 and p 24/25). As Walden Bello comments in a 2008 article, *Destroying African Agriculture: 'Whether in Latin America, Asia, or Africa, the story has been the same: the destabilization of peasant producers by a one-two punch of IMF-World Bank structural adjustment programs that gutted government investment in the countryside followed by the massive influx of subsidized U.S. and European Union agricultural imports after the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture pried open markets.'* These policies not only destroyed food security, the unfair trade practices of the EU and US, legitimised by the WTO, allowed heavily subsidised, low-priced goods to enter countries and drove many third world farmers to ruin. Reliance on food imports now leaves the poorest third world people, who are the majority, increasingly vulnerable to price increases and food shortages.

As if these inflicted problems are not enough, the World Bank is now promoting market-led land leasing by poor countries, establishing Investment Promotion Centres to help investors acquire lands (p 20). Commitments especially of the EU, to replace a percentage of oil use with biofuels for car and plane transport of their peoples have driven companies to seek lands to grow biofuels at industrial scale. And incredibly, it's Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa,

known to be drought and famine-prone, whose lands are being targeted for this purpose.

Millions of poor African farmers whose livelihoods depend on customary tenure for access to land are at risk as it's their lands which are being leased at the cheapest imaginable prices, around US\$1 a hectare annually, reports Liz Alden Wily (p 17). Yet with some exceptions, *'no such thing as 'unowned land' exists in sub-Saharan Africa,'* says Wily. *'Every corner of every state has a customary owner.'* Perhaps the World Bank doesn't know this. Perhaps the World Bank is also unaware of the famine in Sub-Saharan Africa right now (p 4), or that droughts are becoming more frequent with climate change, or how scarce water is in drought regions and how hungry biofuel crops are for water. Perhaps the World Bank is also unaware that with climate change in sub-Saharan Africa, arid and semi-arid regions are projected to increase by 60 million to 90 million hectares, and in Southern Africa, yields from rain-fed agriculture are estimated to halve from 2000–2020 (p 34). Others also seem unaware of these matters.

Influential academics from New Zealand and the US have spoken warmly at public meetings recently in Wellington about the potential for biofuel production in Sub-Saharan Africa to sustain the rich world's car use. And in April 2010 at a conference on biofuels organised by the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority, EECA, a speaker for a car company from Japan, said there was a potentially large market for cars in third world countries. This seems inappropriate considering the food crisis. Surely what the majority in third world countries really want, is not cars, but land to grow their food on and freedom from being harassed by destructive policies of international institution, which can only be described as genocidal. At least Marie Antoinette was talking about food, when she spoke the fateful words, 'let them eat cake.' Today the rich only talk of cars.

A life-sustaining, far better future lies in a return to local agriculture and the resurging interest in agroecology, as Oliver de Schutter, Special Rapporteur to the UN on the Right to Food, reports (p 33). Millions of small-scale farmers using agroecology techniques over the past 10 years have had remarkable successes, greatly increasing crop yields. 'It's vital to make the transition to agroecology, a low-carbon, resource-preserving, resilient agriculture that can combat hunger and benefit many millions of the world's poorest farmers,' he says. An exciting, hopeful and just future lies also in people in rich countries taking up the challenge to reduce by 90% our huge consumption levels to fair levels, as Ted Trainer suggests (p 40). We can do this quite easily he says, and have a far more enjoyable life in self-sufficient, small local economies. This would also remove the ecological burdens we place on third world people, whose land is used to provide us with luxury goods at the expense of their basic food needs. – *Kay Weir*