FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND JUSTICE
Marlo Wang with Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

Marlo Wang of DEMOCRACY NOW! interviews Charlotte Malterre-Barthes Director-General for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

MARLO WANG: In an address that you delivered to the United Nations General Assembly on the occasion of the FAO 90th anniversary, you claimed that "we have understood that changing the environment to get to our food has immense consequences". What do you mean by that?

MALTERRE-BARTHES: We have shifted paradigms. It has been extensively debated whether the crisis of 2020 was beneficial to our environment, a position I find problematic because it ignores the toll of human lives and suffering.

At the same time, a radical change did occur, one that affected the entire production chain and global logistics of food. The large decline in meat consumption and highly valued products originated in 2020 and snowballed into a sort of economic epiphany and dietary change.

True, it has been partially driven by a loss of purchase-power, but also accompanied by an opinion shift among both the population and decision-making bodies. You can see this by how governments implementing emergency food assistance, nutrition interventions and safety nets policies decided to tap into their own local or neighbouring food production systems rather to import food. Most countries also reviewed trade and taxation policies, and waived VAT on local farming products. In the long run, it thus became not only obviously absurd to ship low-nutritious refrigerated goods across the planet, but demand de facto flattened. This fact, combined with restrictions on carbon footprint, a non-compensable footprint, for globally non-necessary foods, resulted in the food production sector essentially focusing on staple food. This resulted in the reconstruction or expansion of local agriculture.

Why was grain exempted from these CO2 restrictions?

Today fresh products are largely sourced from local foodsheds. Glob- ally we are witnessing the transitioning back to "native" diets. These are based on both "classic" locally grown food, complemented by ever-growing sustainably produced non-native fresh food. But meanwhile many people still rely on heavy grain-based nutrition, may it be rice, wheat, or maize, so this needs to remain accessible. As an example, governments that for decades relied on bread subsidies for political stability or poverty alleviation needed time to phase out these policies, and to reconstruct their destroyed local food production systems. That's why grain can still travel but within a negotiated radius or route.

You also mentioned the banning of patented seeds and bio-piracy …

Yes, this is a major and jubilant transformation: the prevalence of open access to genetic resources over patented seeds, basically the recognition of seeds as a common good. Communities are now

fully benefiting from the protection of seed as a commons, as initiated by Open-Source Seeds, and the dominance of the proprietary commons-based seeds sector strengthened the position of farmers and food producers worldwide, towards a sustainable agro-system based on local seeds. This is also important because the need for climate-smart crops is still high and we have not yet managed to fully overturn that issue, despite progress.

Can you tell us a bit about the current situation regarding the palm oil monoculture and deforestation caused by this practice?

I think there is an interesting story here. The rise of palm oil goes hand in hand with the rise of processed and stored foods, and of the food-processing industry. We have seen a sharp rise in consumption of processed and dry goods during the crisis, but this demand collapsed dramatically after that period, as the transition to local food and healthier diets was underway. After most Western governments put an end to agrofuel subsidies and incentives following the decline in private and business mobility, and demand for vegetable oil and energy slumbered, local communities previously engaged in palm oil production have now returned to sustenance farming, which means partially restored bio-diverse agriculture and ecosystems. So while afforestation is not yet the order of the day, de-forestation is not as prevalent as it was a decade ago, which is critical to the mitigation of climate change.

You are an architect by training, can you tell us a bit more about the effects of these policies on construction and the practice of architecture at large?

To me, architecture is a discipline that thrives by borrowing and learning from other fields, as well as a unique tool to understand and design our world. As we have faced and still face environmental degradation, geopolitical insecurities and social and spatial injustice, architecture and urbanism have finally confronted these urgencies. But it is true that architecture as a profession was slow to evolve from perceiving practice as exclusively focused on construction, and evolve into a comprehensive understanding of the discipline preoccupied by the production of space at large.

I feel confident in saying that architecture now is extremely innovative regarding renewing buildings stocks, reuse and renovations, and densification tactics as a logical consequence of the collapse of the real estate market as we knew it a decade ago. Architecture adapted to new spatial priorities after the international arable ground ownership policies made food production more profitable than real estate.

To conclude, will you expand on the political struggles we still face in terms of food production and access for all?

To understand that political, economic and spatial practices are central to the production of food is also to understand the power dynamics at play in regard to hunger and poverty. I like referring to Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, expanding it to include food as a means to control populations, something that Achille Mbembe has defined further as necropolitics. I think many of the terrible inequalities and private corporate interests in food production have been dissolved, but it is only thanks to a mélange of solidarity, soft

control, and power shifts that have occurred, so we have to remain vigilant. The situation regarding poverty and hunger is still acute. Civil unrest, poor governance, and inadequate public support for agricultural development, in particular water control, are hurdles that still need to be overcome. We need more concerted efforts to address the problems affecting governance, production, trade, and debt. We have not yet reached our objective to eradicate—and I will repeat—eradicate, not reduce, poverty and hunger.