



The Developing World: A Dumping Ground for Irradiated Foods

Dumping is a nasty term for a nasty practice. Dumping carries associations of disposal, of abandonment, of imposition. Waste is dumped out of sight, out of mind, and problems are dumped on those lacking the power to refuse. Dumping is irresponsible, arrogant and forceful. And dumping is what will be done with surpluses of irradiated food.

Industrialized factory-style farming in the developed world facilitates the cheap mass production of food. Surpluses that cannot be locally sold might then be government subsidized for export and flood the global market, driving down world prices and undermining domestic competition within importing countries.

Such dumping spells disaster for farmers and small-scale producers who cannot compete with the unrealistically low prices created by government bailouts in the wealthy Global North.

The inclusion of agriculture trade policies within the framework of the WTO, NAFTA and other international treaties has further aggravated the wide-scale dumping of agricultural products. Under global trade agreements, countries may be forced to import goods that undersell domestic produce. This economic threat can also have devastating effects on the food security, environment, and social fabric of developing countries.

Moreover, countries may be forced to import foods that do not satisfy national standards. Under the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO), a nation's domestic food safety laws and its use of the precautionary principle can be challenged as "barriers to trade" through the WTO's powerful and binding dispute resolution system.

Specifically, the SPS Agreement recognizes the Codex Alimentarius Commission as the source for enforceable international standards on food safety. Codex has not only set poor standards for irradiated foods, but is currently in the process of

weakening these standards. As a consequence, countries may be forced to import irradiated food and other food that does not meet their domestic standards for food safety.

Wide-scale irradiation of food will lead to an increase in dumping. With a shelf life extended up to three times its normal length, surpluses of irradiated food will grow, and food conglomerates will need to dump these stores on whoever will take them, namely the economically disenfranchised peoples of the developing world. Due to high capital costs, staples will be irradiated in industrialized countries and subsequently dumped in the Global South.

As farmers in the developing world won't be able to compete with these cheap imports, their land and labor will become susceptible to joint ventures aimed at growing cash crops of tropical produce. Mono-culture crops will be irradiated and shipped at low cost back to the industrialized world. Agricultural diversity, and hence ecological sustainability, will be turned a blind eye while shifting focus to the bottom line.

Dumping, therefore, will occur in both directions: surplus staples to the developing world and luxury items to the industrialized world, while economic autonomy, food sovereignty and environmental sustainability are thrown out the window.

Not only will the dumping of irradiated foods harm local economies, but it also stands to harm the health of local populations. Irradiated food has not been proven safe for human consump-

tion, and research has shown that irradiated food can cause cancer, genetic mutations, stillbirths, organ malfunction, nutritional deficiencies, and other serious health problems in test animals.

Moreover, the irradiation of food drastically lowers its nutritional value. Vitamins suffer substantial losses from irradiation, which is accelerated during lengthened storage time. Vitamins are further lost during cooking.¹ Irradiated foods lack sufficient nutrients and abound in health hazards. The developing world should not be forced to consume risky, plastic food for the sake of global free trade and corporate profits.

In addition to the dumping of irradiated foods through trade agreements, irradiated surpluses will likely be channeled through food aid programs. The U.S. is currently sending genetically modified foods, unlabeled as such, in disaster relief and food aid to developing countries all over the world.² As such, it is unlikely that the U.S. would suffer any moral qualms over passing out irradiated staples to the world's starving millions.

As is the case with "humanitarian military intervention," the U.S. administration prides itself on both the goodwill and the self-serving aspects of "humanitarian dumping." In fact, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman has advocated the use of humanitarian aid to further corporate agendas.

Glickman has encouraged multinational corporations to contribute biotech foods to foreign aid programs: "If they took the longer view they might see the benefit of focusing on the developing world not just as a gesture of corporate citizenship, but because such an investment will ultimately pay dividends as developing countries mature into reliable customers."³ Such thinking prescribes a new axiom for corporate-led development: rather than teaching people to fish, pass out tins of irradiated sardines with coupons for future purchases.

Feeding the world with irradiated products is on the public relations agenda of international agencies and multinational corporations alike. In an effort to curry favor among relief groups and drape themselves in nobility, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the "Star Wars" defense contractor Titan Corporation, and other transnational entities have put forth dubious proposals to marshal irradiation as a silver bullet to end world hunger. They market food irradiation as a high-tech weapon in the war against starvation and malnutrition, overlooking the political

roots of poverty and hunger.

Food irradiation combined with agricultural dumping will prove a nightmare to sustainable development. An increased consolidation of the industrialized food supply will create a high level of dependence on import-export relationships, while undermining food security and sovereignty, basic rights to access food and to define domestic food and agriculture policies.⁴

Industrialized farming adds stress to the environment as more forests are logged, waterways are polluted with more chemicals and waste, and land is deprived of the subtle nourishment and self-maintenance provided by diverse planting and traditional farming methods.⁵

The destruction of family farms leads to rural migration and urban sprawl, poverty, and the myriad of social ills that come of social stress and economic depression. Women, marginalized, underrepresented, and overworked in most societies, often bear the brunt of such economic, political, and social turmoil.⁶

The industrialized world has long exploited developing countries through a multitude of detrimental political and economic policies and practices. As if enough damage hadn't been incurred already, the spread of food irradiation promises to dump more inappropriate development strategies, dump more counterproductive trade policies, and dump more health risks on the developing world.

Notes

¹ Webb, Tony et al. *Food Irradiation: Who Wants It?* Thorsons Publishing Group: England, 1987.

² "Food Aid in the New Millennium: Genetically Engineered Food and Foreign Assistance," Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy Fact Sheet, Dec. 2000.

³ "U.S. Debate Over Biotech Food Ignores its Humanitarian Potential," Associated Press, July 17, 2000, cited in "Food Aid in the New Millennium: Genetically Engineered Food and Foreign Assistance," Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy Fact Sheet, Dec. 2000.

⁴ "Food Sovereignty and International Trade" Via Campesina, Oct. 2000.

⁵ "Agriculture in Developing Countries: Which Way Forward? Small Farmers and the Need for Alternative, Development-Friendly Food Production Systems," by Aileen Kwa, The South Centre.

⁶ See "Trade and Hunger: An Overview of Case Studies on the Impact of Trade Liberalisation on Food Security" by John Madeley, Forum Syd, 2000.



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