

## DEVELOPMENT:

# Traditional Foods in Fight Against Hunger

Francesca Colombo\*

**TURIN, Italy, Nov 2 (Tierramérica) - Hunger affects 846 million people around the globe, and 35 countries suffer food insecurity due to shortages, internal disorder or adverse climate. Part of the solution to these problems lies in traditional resources and practices, according to representatives from world "food communities" gathered in Italy.**

At the Terra Madre world meeting, held last week in the northern Italian city of Turin, there were farmers from as far away as the Philippines or the Argentine Pampas, and as close as France, representatives of the African Masai ethnic group, and many others, drawn together by the ideal of creating a sustainable economy that is capable of resolving the global food problem.

"We can cooperate amongst ourselves and make proposals to governments for confronting the globalisation process that forced us to cut prices. We are among the leading producers of rice in the world, but we sell at 30 cents on the dollar per kilo," Nguyen Van Vinh, from the Vietnamese biological rice growing community Hai Phong, told Tierramérica.

In that community, in northeast Vietnam, around 100 families introduce ducklings into the rice paddies to control insects. The duck droppings in turn serve as fertiliser. The farmers say there is no need to use farm chemicals on their rice crops.

The participants in the "World Meeting of Food Communities", sponsored by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), advocated for wider consumption of highly nutritious cereals like amaranth (*Amaranthus caudatus*), quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*, also known as Inca wheat), and sorghum (*Sorghum vulgare*), which are resistant to extreme climate and disease.

The problem is that "young people prefer junk food like fried potatoes and hamburgers, and they reject traditional dishes," says Dutta Mita, representative from Bankura, a rice, maize and sugarcane farming community in West Bengala (northeast), India.

"They want to copy the U.S. lifestyle they see in movies, and the food producers end up selling that type of food," Mita adds.

Furthermore, the FAO Global Information and Early Warning System has recorded a decline in the global reserves of grains, standing at 229.7 million tons.

Food production is affected by several factors, such as civil war, plagues and extreme climate phenomena in Africa, humanitarian crises in North Korea, Iraq and Sri Lanka, or shortages, as in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

According to the Terra Madre meeting participants -- some 5,000 in all --, it is essential to diversify eating habits and to keep in mind that eating the meat of the llama in Bolivia, the bison in Canada or the reindeer in Sweden, Finland, Russia and Norway, is a more sustainable practice than eating chicken or beef, Blind Ingemas, a reindeer meat producer, told Tierramérica.

Reindeer is a traditional food of the Sami (Laplanders) of the northern Scandinavian coasts, where winter lasts 200 days, with temperatures plummeting to 30 degrees below zero Celsius.

A study of the eastern Thai provinces of Kalasin, Yasothon, Roi-et, Khon-Kaen and Surin found more than 100 varieties of rice, of which only 50 are currently being cultivated, some for consumption of the rice grain itself, others for making biscuits, noodles, wines and liquors.

"We are small and poor communities. We grow rice for our survival and some to sell on the market. We don't compete with conventional products, we are only trying to do the best possible. We take care of the environment and we don't use chemical products," Avaiporn Suthonthanyakon, a Thai farmer of traditional rice varieties, told Tierramérica.

At the other end of the chain of food production are the cooks, and some were also present for the Turin gathering.

"We distribute traditional recipes from the pre-Columbus era, like 'locro' (a stew of corn, beans and meat), tamales (shredded meat wrapped in corn dough), 'humitas' (thick corn sauce in corn leaves), and autochthonous products like maize and Andean potatoes," Argentine Alejandra García, a chef of traditional foods, said in a Tierramérica interview.

"All of this gets lost because of globalisation, and the idea is that we should cook as if we were in the house of our grandmothers," she said.

(\* Francesca Colombo is a Tierramérica contributor. Originally published Oct. 30 by Latin American newspapers that are part of the Tierramérica network. Tierramérica is a specialised news service produced by IPS with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme.)

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