

Speech by Prof. Klaus Töpfer, Vice Chairman of Welthungerhilfe

ARD theme week

Food is life! A human right!

The reality: one billion people are going hungry or rather: one thousand million people. To put it even more graphically: 12 times the population of Germany. Children in particular are affected, above all small children. Welthungerhilfe has established that about twenty-five thousand people die each day from illnesses that are triggered by undernutrition and hunger. But: Food is life! A human right!

Undernutrition – poor nutrition – malnutrition:

Affecting above all children in the first years of their life and entailing massive negative consequences for the entire life of these children because physical and mental disorders become more frequent and are the direct result of undernutrition, poor nutrition and malnutrition. Food is life!

I lived in Africa for eight years, in Nairobi, Kenya. There I was confronted with poverty, hunger and hopelessness virtually on a daily basis.

In this world we talk about globalisation. But this world is more than ever a divided world. “Dietary problems” – this phrase has two diametrically opposing meanings depending on which of the two parts of the world on our planet it is used in. For up to 75 percent of humanity as a whole who live in the so-called developing countries, “dietary problem” means: What can be done to ensure that everyone has enough to eat, and that hunger and poor nutrition can be overcome – permanently – and with certainty. No longer being dependent on aid measures from other parts of the world, which always save lives.

In the so-called highly developed countries on the other hand, “dietary problem” means: What can be done to stop obesity, particularly amongst children, so that the many illnesses caused by obesity don’t become pandemics, which make medical costs soar.

And what’s more: How long can society allow this scandal to go on: the fact that each day more food is thrown away or goes off, than would be needed to provide everyone throughout the world with enough to eat? In the highly developed countries up to 50 percent of all food is thrown away, left to rot, or never reaches the consumer. That’s almost 20 million tonnes of food.

Aren't we spending more and more money on dieting and slimming products and on slimming treatments? More than enough money to solve the global hunger problem. We too are confronted with the social challenges of a population that is becoming increasingly disjointed: In many towns and cities soup kitchen have become indispensable, to prevent real hunger. The number of people affected continues to grow.

In the highly developed countries, including and especially right here in Germany, "foodstuffs" are increasingly becoming the "stuff" of entertainment. In a spirit of critical concern, many people in the developing countries are asking whether our "civilisation" hasn't already degenerated into "excess-sation". A true throw-away society, throwing away food – and life. Our eating habits mean that ever more energy and water is consumed to produce and preserve what we eat, and to transport and package it – We're eating oil!

The direct and indirect consumption of water in foodstuffs, so-called "virtual" water consumption, continues to rise significantly. As does the "virtual" consumption of land: The EU "imports" 35 million hectares of agricultural land. Due to the importing of the agricultural produce grown on it (foodstuffs, natural fibres, bio-energy etc.).

Furthermore, throughout the world "western" eating habits are becoming an ideal to be emulated – like our consumer habits as a whole. The result is that the demand for food is increasing disproportionately compared to the growth in population: The approximately nine billion people who will be living on the earth in the middle of this century – and who want to live in human dignity and without hunger – if our eating habits continue to spread, in arithmetical terms they will require as much food as twelve billion people today.

What can be done? The answer lies with us all, as consumers! Always blaming other people doesn't help! Consumers must be provided with better information about food in a language that they can understand, and with, clear, immediately and easily recognisable symbols and colours.

A healthy diet and regional products in keeping with the seasons – all these things contribute to overcoming the big food problems. We need a lifelong education! In our own country too: poor nutrition is especially a social problem. "Lifestyle of health and sustainability" the so called "LOHAS" is not enough in itself. An awareness of healthy eating must be acquired in all sectors of society. We can no longer accept without comment the throwing away of food. Calling time on the throw-away society!

Aid for agriculture in developing countries, for the farmers there, often small-scale farmers. For this, it's also necessary to invest more in agricultural research and in providing advice to farmers. Above all, improvements must also be made in the marketing infrastructure, in storage, transportation and processing. So that food can reach consumers in good condition.

Agricultural research has been criminally neglected. The BioEconomy Council has already presented a comprehensive analysis of this. We must learn from the mistakes of the "green revolution", above all in Asia, in the 1960's: The industrialisation of agriculture will certainly not be able to overcome the problems! Action should focus on: soil conservation, conserving biodiversity, and the sustainable use of fertilisers and pesticides.

Significantly improving our use of water is also required as agriculture is responsible for up to 75 percent of the demand for water. Water and soils are the crucial constraints on the production of foodstuffs: "more crop per drop" – against the backdrop of climate change this is virtually a life-or-death issue. Investing in sewage treatment plants, in improved irrigation systems, in effective water management.

The rapid phasing out of subsidies for exports of agricultural produce which make the development of small-scale agriculture in developing countries more difficult or impossible. Making any speculation in foodstuffs on the stock exchange socially unacceptable.

And lots more besides: Taking decisive measures against the speculative buying up of areas used for agricultural production in developing countries. Broad-based social involvement in effectively combating current and acute hunger disasters – which are often the result of natural disasters, as Pakistan and Haiti have shown in a particularly dramatic way.

I would like to express my thanks and respect to the many thousands of people who have made generous donations to help overcome these disasters. At the same time, constantly focusing our thoughts and actions beyond the horizon of current humanitarian aid –determining what the causes are, and eradicating them.

Help towards self-help is the challenge!

Food is life! A human right.

It's great that ARD has decided to run this theme week this year! Hopefully this will galvanise still more people to follow global developments even more closely, but above all here at home also – in our families, in our neighbourhoods, and in our towns and cities.

And to also contribute towards turning consciousness into action.