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## “The right to food must not be left at the mercy of free markets”

*Francisco Mari from Bread for the World says the Global North needs to be held accountable for its role in the world's hunger crises. Development goals such as “Zero Hunger” and “Zero Poverty” cannot be achieved without a holistic approach and a restructuring of trade and agricultural relations with Africa.*

*Author: Sarah Mersch, Editor: Katrin Zilm, Translation: Gretchen Vogel*

*This article appears as part of our series on sustainable development goals and tech-based solutions from Africa, which we are discussing with an African-German community.*

**Mr. Mari, when the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) presented its [new Africa strategy](#) at the end of January, Minister [Svenja Schulze said](#) that the aim was to decolonize cooperation. Does the strategy do that?**

**Francisco Mari:** [Decolonization is](#) a big word. Germany is embedded in the overall structure of the European Union, the framework of which is more binding than any bilateral cooperations, and of course also in the United Nations, the G7 and, of course, with regard to trade relations, the framework conditions of the WTO. These framework conditions are based on [the old colonial relationships](#). Germany cannot completely free itself from this, and of course it also has its own interests. We have experienced that in recent weeks with the many trips by German politicians, Ms. Schulze herself, but also the Foreign Minister and the Federal Chancellor. Actually, it would be better to acknowledge that because of the difference in power, equal relationships are fundamentally impossible. Although there are certainly approaches to changing relations, colonization has not been abolished because a minister says so.

## **Context: How can the SDGs be reached?**

The first two of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are fighting hunger and poverty. But how can “No Poverty” and “No Hunger” be implemented in concrete terms? How realistic is it to achieve these goals and how would global structures have to change in order to achieve them? Noble words are not enough; a fundamental structural and political change must take place, says Francisco Mari. The project manager for world food policies, agricultural trade and maritime policy at the aid organization Bread for the World is a member of our project's African-German community. In his view, the primary responsibility lies with the Global North.

### **What would have to happen, for example with regard to trade policy, to at least initiate this decolonization if it cannot be achieved overnight?**

Negotiations on the Economic Partnership Agreement have dragged on for 20 years. The aim of the EU at the time was to continue importing all the products that were important in the past, including for the German colonies - i.e. palm oil, agricultural products and mineral raw materials - to Europe duty-free. Since then, however, there has been pressure for the African markets to open up in return. This principle of reciprocity - even if a few buffers were built in with better protection for agricultural products - has remained and has led to an incredible patchwork of special relations with Europe on the continent, since not even a dozen African countries have agreed to these bilateral agreements. In addition, there is now the initiative of the African states to create their own joint free trade zone among themselves. So far, Africa's trade relations have mainly existed with Europe, where raw materials and agricultural products are exported, but domestic trade is marginalized. In Africa it is around 20 percent, while in the EU it is 80 to 90 percent, for example. The African Free Trade Area is the right approach to change that. But this zone is cut up, counteracted by this patchwork of trade rules.

### **Due to the bilateral agreements between Europe and individual African states...**

Exactly, because Europe is part of the African free trade zone. For example, the EU has very good free trade agreements with Morocco, Ghana, Kenya and southern Africa. This means that if these countries open up to their neighbors, then the agreement with the EU also affects those neighboring countries. There are so-called rules of origin: Nigeria could, for example, prevent Benin from exporting goods to Nigeria that originate in Europe. But then customs authorities in each

country would need to check whether the yoghurt from Benin that comes to Nigeria was produced with Beninese milk or with European milk powder. Now you can imagine that the customs offices in these countries would have a lot to do, given the long land borders. Testing every yogurt is almost impossible. Europe has behaved very strategically. However, no one mentions this when the economic partnership agreements are discussed as part of the Africa strategy. We call for a freeze on these agreements, which have already torn countries apart within the region. West Africa is a case in point. There are only two countries with agreements with the EU, but an economic union that is relatively successful, even allowing free movement of goods and people. But Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire have to open their markets to the EU and their neighbors don't. And in East Africa we have the growing problem that Kenya has almost had to leave the East African Economic Community, because it has not only concluded an agreement with Europe, but also a very similar one with the United Kingdom after Brexit. That means British items can make their way into all these countries duty free. Now the US is also pushing Kenya for a bilateral treaty. So Kenya breaks out of the East African agreement to the detriment of the other states. Tanzania is very angry, as is Uganda. Just imagine if something like this happened in Europe: France would make an agreement with China, Bulgaria maybe with Ukraine and Denmark with the USA, but still with a common internal market. That would be chaos.



*Francisco Mari argues for a fundamental reform of trade relations between Africa and Europe. Copyright: Hermann Bredehorst/Brot für die Welt*

[Francisco Mari](#) has worked at Bread for the World since 2009 as a project officer for lobbying and advocacy in the areas of world hunger, agricultural trade and maritime policy. His work focuses on the topics of food security, the trade and fisheries agreements between the EU and Africa, the World Trade Organization (WTO),

artisanal fisheries, deep-sea mining and the effects of food standards on small producers.

Before joining Bread for the World, he worked for several years at an organization supporting sustainable agriculture in Cameroon. There he led studies examining the effects of development policies, including on the effects of used clothing exports on the textile industry in Africa and on lobbying efforts regarding EU meat exports to West Africa.

**Trade policy issues are closely linked to agriculture and the fight against hunger and poverty. In their [press release](#) on the BMZ's Africa strategy, Bread for the World and Misereor write that the strategy correctly identifies the causes and effects of the food crisis that various countries on the continent are currently experiencing, but that concrete measures to counter the crises are lacking. What do you think such measures should look like?**

Above all, we criticize the fact that the strategy seems to leave out the role of Germany, even if Agriculture Minister Cem Özdemir is a bit ahead of his colleagues - for example compared to the European Commissioner for Agriculture, who is really blind to what is actually happening at the moment and is proud of the fact that Europe is the world's largest exporter.

**“Fundamental rights such as the right to food must not be left to the mercy of free markets.”**

But that is precisely the problem: fundamental rights such as the right to food must not be left to the mercy of free markets, stock exchanges, dependencies, volatility and susceptibility to crises. It was recognized after the last food crisis in 2008/2009 that we need crisis-proof systems that at least cover basic needs such as education and health, but above all food. But then this is dealt with in a very contradictory way. One would have to reduce the [dependencies](#) through much more massive support for local production. Although Tunisia has been [dependent on wheat](#) for centuries, southern Tunisia, like southern Egypt, used to grow sorghum, and it was much better suited to local conditions. You might not be able to bake a French baguette from it, but you can make flatbread.

Because of their landlocked locations, Niger and Mali, for example, are in the situation that they have no direct ports. To

this day, 80 or 90 percent of their diet comes from local grain and they have not ended up in the same situation of being dependent on wheat as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Senegal or Somalia, which are dependent on imports. They also have problems because transport costs are very high, but the independence is there.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the idea came up that the African states should produce foods for the world market that are relatively expensive here - vegetables, nuts, cocoa, coffee - and use the income to buy our subsidized cheap products such as chicken, milk and wheat. That was the World Bank's idea for the economic development of the agricultural sector in Africa. The GTZ [now renamed GIZ], everyone funded it.

## **“People are now trying to invest in modern agriculture and swapping one dependency for another.”**

Especially since the 2008/2009 crisis, people are now trying to invest in modern agriculture and swapping one dependency for another: many countries, for example, have insanely increased the cultivation of maize while local products are neglected - in [Senegal](#), for example, their own millet, which needs very little water or fertilizer. But maize is very dependent on artificial fertilisers, which means [imported fertilisers](#). And now we have to worry that the next harvest in Africa will be poor because the farmers cannot afford fertilizer and the pesticides have also become more expensive. We're not quite sure whether Mrs. Schulze really heard the alarm bells. The initiative for food security, in which the World Bank is also prominently involved, includes credits of up to 30 billion dollars, mostly for the purchase of fertilizer. So the countries go into debt again to buy more fertilizer. The fertilizer companies, of course, profit from this.

### **So you think we have to move away from the idea of food security towards food sovereignty? In view of the general conditions - the climate crisis, for example, which is hitting many African countries particularly hard - is that realistic at all?**

It's not about self-sufficiency. That will not work. What we need are crisis mechanisms that can take effect quickly when prices are high and reduce speculation on these markets. Let's stay with the wheat: That means that if there are shortages like there are at the moment, the countries that

have stored grain would be required to bring it onto the market. But countries that are agricultural exporters have no interest in reducing this sort of dependency. We need mechanisms to counteract that, because we will have situations in the coming decades in which we will have to quickly fall back on stored food.

## “Many countries used to store their main staples locally and were independent.”

Many countries used to store their main staples locally and were independent. But in Africa, this was essentially abolished by the World Bank, because they banned states from subsidizing this storage and from purchasing grain to store. They wanted to reduce government spending overall in order to reduce debt. You also have to move away from the three or four major types of grain--maize, wheat and rice--and return to more local varieties. There is no single



### **Impressions from South Africa: how poverty and hunger are felt on a daily basis**

In South Africa, there is racial and class oppression, which results in poverty and hunger. There were systems during the apartheid era that were designed to ensure that the levels of inequality are very, very, very high. So in order to close that gap, yes, the government has got policies in place, but the monitoring of these policies is lacking. There is a huge gap in what is written in the policies and what is happening in real life. So all these things are taking time. It's very ambitious to think that by 2030 we would have resolved poverty and hunger. South Africa is still the most unequal country of the whole world.

**Noxolo Mbokoma**, Executive Director of the non-profit organisation of Zenzeleni Community Networks, South Africa | *Copyright: Roger Jardine*

solution that works for everyone, but there has to be a mechanism in the World Food Council that, for example, would support farmers in regions near famine areas. Take [Kenya](#): I think the harvest there has been poor for the fifth year in a row. But in southern Kenya, on Mount Kenya, you can

still grow crops, and most people eat well there. Farmers there should be told: You can produce more, and we'll buy it from you at reasonable prices to support food security in the north. Or take Cameroon: Southern Cameroon is fertile, but agriculture is not as productive as it could be and the north is starving. There are definitely opportunities to do more. It is also important that knowledge sharing takes place. Farmers in Mali have always lived, so to speak, in the climate crisis. There you have to grow differently than in fertile areas in Kenya, India or Ghana. The [exchange of seeds and varieties](#) and seed research must also be promoted so that new dependencies do not arise.



**Mayssa Mrabet**, Director of Afkar Think Tank's incubation programme, Tunisia

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### **Impressions from Tunisia: How poverty and hunger are felt on a daily basis**

Mayssa Mrabet, Director of Afkar Think Tank's incubation programme, Tunisia

I see more and more people around me leaving, hoping for a better life. There is no end in sight for this political and economic crisis which has been going on for years. There's always another article announcing a new downgrading of the country's credit rating. They are calling it an unprecedented economic crisis. No matter how much we earn, it's still hard to make ends meet at the end of the month. We are faced with constant inflation, without any increase in salaries. People also leave because we feel like prisoners in this country. We need a visa to travel to many countries. Now we are refused visas when before, with our professional and social status, we could still get visas. Now, we have to wait four, six months sometimes to get an appointment and we miss so many professional opportunities—for example conferences to which we are invited, and we end up not going. My optimistic side always hopes that these people who leave will come back in a few years.

### **In our series of articles we deal with the Sustainable Development Goals. Among other things, those include abolishing both hunger and poverty by 2030. It's 2023. How realistic is that?**

Completely unrealistic. I don't think it's feasible. Even the United Nations recognizes that if we manage to reduce the [number of hungry people](#) from 800 million to 600 million by 2030, that's a significant accomplishment given the fact that we keep having new [crisis situations](#), but there is no mechanism that helps to minimize their impact. It's actually not so much about agricultural production, because we have enough food.

## Does that mean it is primarily a distribution problem?

Not only that, it's also about waste. Half of the food that is harvested does not enter the food cycle at all. That is why this question of zero hunger will not be solved without sensible social security systems. This is all the more important because we are no longer only dealing with hunger situations that can be pinpointed. Not only are there 10 million starving in Somalia and 40 million in Ethiopia, but there are populations within many countries that currently have only one meal a day. And we will experience situations where, due to the climate crisis, an entire harvest suddenly fails and then there is hunger for a year or two. We need new systems to deal with that. The SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) have to be considered together. International development cooperation must address the issue of social security systems. But then the question arises about where the funds are to come from. And there we are again with trade and raw materials policy. For example, [green hydrogen](#) is to be produced in Namibia, but processed in the Duisburg steelworks. Jobs in Duisburg are preserved but hardly any are created in Namibia. That means there will be no tax revenue for Namibia to build up social security systems. The African countries must have the opportunity to create industry, added value, tax revenue and jobs that give governments the chance to react to crises such as a hunger crisis - just as the government does in Germany. If we don't facilitate this, we're back to the colonial approach that we're the ones to save them again.

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