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Oleg Kobiakov: Food Security or Not by Bread Alone

Almost a dozen regions of Russia are witnessing a slow but steady onset of desert sands destroying potential agricultural land. How dangerous is this trend? The share of salt and sugar in the diet of Russian citizens, which contribute to the development of non-communicable diseases, is literally off the scale. What could be done? With some 780 million people in the world suffering from chronic hunger, what should and could be done to eradicate this shameful phenomenon?

Oleg Kobiakov, Director of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Liaison Office with the Russian Federation, offered answers to this burning issue in an interview on the margins of the 27th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF).

Astrakhan Oblast and Kalmykia are the most exposed to desertification and erosion of agricultural lands. How significant is the threat to food and environmental security on these territories and for Russia as a whole?

Desertification and soil erosion is a large-scale challenge, which is exacerbating the problem. Some 10 years ago, the first man-made desert in Europe appeared on the territory of Kalmykia due to uncontrolled grazing, and it has not gone anywhere since then. Sands are advancing in parts of the southern Urals, in the Samara and Orenburg regions, where forest-steppe turns into steppe, also in Transbaikalia, Buryatia, Tuva, and, of course, in the southern Volga region, in the Volgograd and Astrakhan

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regions.

If we look at this problem in a broader context, we need to take into account the global situation with soil erosion. Already about 40% of all land areas in the world have been degraded to a greater or lesser extent. This scourge directly affects half of the world's population. Since 2000, the number and duration of droughts have increased by 29%.

According to statistics compiled, among others, by the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), at least 100 million hectares of previously healthy and productive land have been degraded worldwide between 2015 and 2019. This is an unfortunate fact: every second, approximately 3.17 hectares of land are being rendered unusable for agriculture.

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What is the reason for the loss of this vital natural resource?

In addition to the negative effects of climate change, the culprit is both governments and businesses, and above all farmers themselves, who use land and water resources carelessly. We forget that the Earth's natural resources, as the North American Indians used to say, are not inherited from our ancestors, but borrowed from our descendants.

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In your opinion, do experts and decision-makers in the Russian Federation have an understanding of the scale of this scourge?

Russia, as a country with a well developed economy, with scientific and technical potential, is tackling the problem of desertification and soil erosion, as well as helping other countries suffering from these troubles. The arsenal of measures to combat desertification includes creation of forest protection strips and afforestation, phytomelioration, regulation of livestock depending on the bioproductivity of lands, refusal to plow slope soils, alternation of clean and occupied fallows, snow retention, application of no-tillage, fixing sand dunes with vegetation, etc.

We have at our disposal tested methods to combat desertification. There is an understanding of the nature and scale of the problem: if we do not apply urgent measures by 2050, droughts may affect the lives of more than 75% of the world's population. There is also political will. We need to continue to work together, and urgently

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What is FAO and the countries participating in the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) doing in this regard?

FAO provides Russia with expert assistance in these matters and helps coordinate joint actions with its southern neighbors. The largest partnership format in this field is the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. This action program is being implemented around the world from 2021 to 2030.

You addressed a special session of SPIEF-2024 on "What We Eat: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow. The Role of Nutrition in Sustainable Development." You expressed concern over nutrition of Russian citizens. But don't statistics show that according to FAO criteria there is no problem of chronic malnutrition in the country?

Undoubtedly, the mere fact that hunger as a mass phenomenon has been eliminated in Russia should be recognized as a momentous achievement. About 400,000 people are defined as "undernourished", which is less than one third of one percent for a country with a population of about 150 million.

In fact, my concern is not about food availability, but about the fact that Russia is noted for an excessive consumption of salt and sugar. According to the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO), one should eat no more than 2 grams of sodium per day, or 5 grams of salt, if you remember molar weights from high school chemistry. In Russia, the average salt intake exceeds 20 grams, which is 4 times more than the recommended norm.

Moreover, the diet of most Russians is high in carbohydrates and overloaded with simple, easily digestible sugars – up to 5 times higher than in other developed countries. Imagine the situation when you run into a fast-food restaurant for a snack. You have on your tray an assortment of French fries deep-fried with ketchup, ice cream and two glasses of Coca-Cola. All in all, this is what the standard unhealthy diet amounts to.

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What are the options for a quick response to this problem?

We need to achieve the effect of joint actions to popularize, if you will, the promotion of a healthy lifestyle. This is the mission not only for the Ministry of Health and Rospotrebnadzor, but also for food producers, owners of catering companies, organizations of concerned citizens and the media, especially the TV "chefs" so popular in Russia.

At the recent FAO Regional Conference, I had a chance to talk to our Director General, Dr. QU Dongyu, who, by the way, is a PRC citizen. He asked me, "What do you think is the main product for China? Rice? No. It's fish!"

I fully support what was said at the round table at SPIEF, moderated by Dr. Anna Popova, head of Rospotrebnadzor and Chief State Sanitary Doctor of Russia. The speakers called for the adoption of a targeted program to popularize fish and fish products in the diet.

Since we have established who is to blame – it is ourselves, the next traditional question is: What should we do?

If at least one hundredth of the money spent on television advertising "non-alcoholic" beer were used to explain why it is necessary to reduce salt and sugar consumption in the name of health, then, in my opinion, we could register a positive trend in the long term, which would be expressed in a multiple reduction in the number of non-communicable diseases and an increase in life expectancy in Russia.

At the end of last year, FAO estimated that more than 780 million people in the world suffered from chronic hunger. The Global Food Crisis Report 2023 indicates that 282 million people in 59 countries face what you call “severe food insecurity”. What is the reason that the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2) calling for the elimination of hunger as a phenomenon – is not being met? What is FAO's Action Plan?

The food security situation in the world continues to be, one might say, persistently precarious. Most countries and regions unable to feed their populations are at risk from armed conflicts, the adverse effects of climate change and economic crises. Unfortunately, new "hunger hotspots" are also emerging. What can be done? Today, FAO has to admit that we are amid a structural food crisis. This is despite the fact that, in purely physical terms, we produce enough food to feed the world's population.

Nevertheless, I am optimistic about the future. In 1945, when the FAO was founded, 40% of the world's population was hungry;

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today it is less than 10%, although the number of earthlings has grown from 2.3 billion to 8 billion. If we could wisely manage the resources at our disposal, both financial and material and intellectual, if we are determined and consistent in implementing the UN-endorsed agrifood systems transformation program, we will not only overcome the crisis, but also lay the foundations for sustainable development of all agricultural sectors and guarantee food security for everyone.

I will mention one more factor, last but not least. The government, the private sector and we as consumers must pay special attention to reducing food losses and waste. From field to table, up to one-third of everything produced with labor and other inputs is lost. FAO is committed to supporting Member Nations' transition to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems.

I am convinced that by 2030, we can reverse the negative trend of stagnant hunger and get back on the path towards Zero Hunger in the lifetime of the current generation. FAO is committed to moving towards this goal by improving production, nutrition, the environment and quality of life, based on the principle of "No one left behind".

Fertilizer is considered an indispensable precursor in farming, isn't it?

Quite right. At the end of 2022, a joint FAO/World Trade Organization (WTO) study on "Global Fertilizer Markets and Policies" was published. Our experts stressed the need to keep the global fertilizer market in good "working order". The goal is to meet global demand for agricultural products and prevent a food crisis. This requires keeping food, feed and fertilizer markets open, minimizing disruptions to trade, and refraining from any export restrictions (sanctions) inconsistent with WTO rules.

Vadim Vikhrov

P.S. The interview was prepared with the assistance of the press service of the FAO Liaison Office with the Russian Federation.

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