Life in Mathare has always been a struggle; a struggle to access clean water in our taps, security, shelter, clothing and most importantly, food. The struggle for everything defines the beauty of life on this side of the town. To us who grew on this side, food sovereignty is an unfamiliar term, all we’ve known and wished for is food security, having a plate of anything on our tables was more than a luxury. Our food security is defined by the quantity of food and its availability rather than quality, safety and nutritional value. Balanced diet is just a term that existed in our primary school textbooks. Growing up, having a plate of plain rice and porridge was a big deal or even porridge and chapattis despite all being carbohydrates. We were happy as long as our tummies were full.

Back in primary school, having breakfast was a privilege too. On most occasions, my siblings and I went to school on empty stomachs and wait until break time for the porridge prepared in school. This affected our attention in class in the morning hours which are usually the most productive hours of the day. The porridge also had a very unpleasant taste and a course texture and lacking sugar made it worse. We had to fill our tummies and to overcome this we had to carry some jaggery or powdered juices which ideally shouldn’t be used with anything hot. As for the jaggery, we would lick as we sipped our porridge. In my group of five pupils, we could serve our extra porridge in a 5-litre jerry can which would last us the whole day. When it came to lunchtime we served twice or at times even thrice and we could eat till evening before going home. The food wasn’t tasty either but we had to survive.

In the evening, my siblings and I would rush home, change clothes and before doing anything, we reported to our ‘part time jobs’. This part time job involved helping our neighbor prepare chicken legs, heads, neck and intestines which would then be prepared very well and sold in the evening. Our pay was a few legs, neck or the head with the sumptuous soup from these delicacies. This was a good way of perhaps balancing our protein-deficient diet and perhaps gaining some hands-on gloves skills that would maybe help us while seeking for jobs in the future if any. In the evening, whatever was served as supper wasn’t an issue as we had spent the whole day fending for our little insatiable tummies. In most cases a decent meal comprised of ugali (whole meal maize flour) and sukumawiki (collard greens) is what would be served.

Its only until recent that i realized that most of the foods I grew up on are either fodder crops or animal feeds in other countries. Even the sumptuous chicken legs and heads that I used to be paid as wage, are probably fit for only stray cats and street mongrels. From the composite flour that used to make our break time porridge, to the lunch meal which up to this date I’ve never been able to tell what the meal comprised of to the evening chicken legs, the African herbs and the vegetables that we used to be given, all these foods would in most cases not make it to the manger or a stable in New meadow Scotland or a farm in probably Texas US or Friesland in the Netherlands. I find it disturbing that what a diet conscious and a very choosy horse would decline to eat is food for millions of schools going children and also refugees. It’s also sad to see that food budget of a well-groomed dog in the leafy suburbs of Nairobi surpasses that of an average adult in our informal settlements in Nairobi. The disparity existing between our countrymen is very much pronounced many years after independence. The saddest part is the
normalization these injustices and instead shifted the blame to the same victims of an unfair system by branding them as lazy by turning a blind eye to all forms of exploitation on these vulnerable groups. To a great extent, subsequent governments since independence have failed us. years after independence, we still grow cash crops that our people don’t consume. This has overtime denied our farmers the arable lands for growing food crops and are also exploited from the sales of the same cash crops. It’s ironical that an average adult from Ivory Coast can’t afford a Cadbury chocolate whose main ingredients have been through the sweat and toiling of a child laborer in the same country. Our best highlands are under coffee and tea plantations which are mostly for export. We might have the best factories for processing these export crops yet our food crops such as tomatoes, cabbages and potatoes rot in the field somewhere in Kinangop due to poor roads and inaccessibility. As we waste tons and tons of food in one part of the country due to poor harvesting, poor storage and transportation, a child in another area dies due to the lack of the same food.

When it rains heavily, a family in Budalangi or Tana River is left without food and when it gets drier, a child in Turakana is dying of hunger and another one in Baragoi is losing cattle to drought. Government projects meant to cushion the nation such as Galana-Kulalu which should ideally be helping bridge the food deficit in the country have been misused, funds embezzled, poorly managed and recently some parts of the land allocated for the project being grabbed and personalized by the same cartels holding our nation hostage. These all happen because we’ve allowed capitalism to tear down our moral fabric as a country where the dignity and sanctity of human life is no longer regarded.

Food has always held a very central role in our cultures as Africans and has been part of our ceremonies from funerals to weddings. The quest for food security and sovereignty has always been an elusive quest for many African countries since independence. When the Union Jack fell in 12th December 1963 in Kenya, the independence government had plans to reduce poverty, diseases, ignorance and chief among them being hunger. This course was lost when our founding fathers chose the capitalistic route at the expense of the socialist path that our communities were used prior to colonial times. This informs why the first corruption case in Independent Kenya was a food scandal!! Ngei Maize Scandal was the first of its kind in the country touching on a commodity that makes part of nearly every Kenyan meal. When they chose the ‘man eat fellow man’ society, they chose profits over fellow countrymen, amassing of wealth at the expense of the citizens and self-aggrandizement at the expense of our communal societies. Fifty-nine years after independence, Kenya still struggles to feed her relatively low population when compared with the resources she’s endowed with from rich soils, arable lands, favorable climate and enough water for irrigation from our rivers and large aquifers in the northern regions which in most cases bear the brunt of drought and water scarcity.

The food cartels in Kenya have established a very strong network cutting across government ministries and departments to private sector. Each successive government either lacks the political good will to fight this well-connected individual or shows a lukewarm approach. Its strong grip on the market ensures they control the prices of the commodities; their availability and the citizens are left at their mercy. They hoard these commodities to hike the prices and
make a kill when the demand goes up. It’s always profits first before anything else. From the lucrative coffee sector, tea even to the lesser lucrative such as potato and tomato sectors are all controlled by these cartels and middlemen who make huge profits while the farmers languish in poverty after toiling hard in the sun.

Back in 2018 when I was still a student in Kakamega, our country faced an acute shortage of maize courtesy of our homegrown cartels and middlemen. Within a fortnight the price of a 2kg maize flour packet shot from Ksh. 80 to Ksh. 150 and one would only be allowed to buy a single packet from the supermarkets around. Being in Kakamega where ugali (maize meal) is the staple delicacy, supermarkets and other stores had rough time controlling the crowds and stampede that would be witnessed at times. In order to overcome the ‘one buyer one packet’ rule, one would ‘employ’ boys from the neighborhood or go with his or her children and each would buy independently.

It is the responsibility of every citizen to stand up against these pro-profits cartels and bring sanity to the food system in the country. Multinationals such as Monsanto which have for long been in the news for all the wrong reasons from unethical business practices to products that are unsafe for both human and animal consumption are a threat to our environment and biodiversity and should not be allowed to transact any business in a country that cares for its citizen.

Just like the bread revolutions in France and Sudan, I hope Unga Revolution (flour) shall one day be contextualized by Kenyans to salvage our ugali.

By Sam Gathanga