

FROM THE UN

FEEDING THE WORLD WORLD FOOD DAY - 16 OCT, 2010

Almost a billion people are suffering from chronic hunger because they are too poor to purchase sufficient food.

Over-population is often cited as a reason for this humanitarian disaster. Tragically, world hunger exists in a world of plenty. Food has never existed in such abundance. There is enough food available to feed the entire global population of almost 7 billion people. In fact, despite a 70 percent population increase over the past 30 years, agriculture globally is producing 17 per cent more calories per person today than it was then. Hunger also exists in rich countries like the US where millions of families go hungry. Surely, this is not due to there being insufficient food around. Basically, the problem is poverty and the volatility of food prices.

Food is like any other product in a market economy, a commodity. Farming is a business. Accordingly, large tracts of the best agricultural land is often devoted to cultivation of coffee, tobacco, cotton and so forth, responding to market demand, rather than feeding poor people. For example, over half the grain produced in the US is used for livestock feed despite the fact that it would provide food for more people than the livestock to which it is fed. This process is aggravated by the fact that some developing countries like China, with an increasing middle class, wish to purchase meat. Furthermore, many farmers produce crops for export as well as for biofuel. There is now more corn grown than staple foods such as wheat and rice for bio fuel. This had led to shortages in staple foods leading to higher market prices.

The problem becomes more difficult due to US farm subsidies, which topped 15 billion dollars last year. The surpluses of the US and other countries are often dumped in underdeveloped countries undermining the abilities of local farmers to compete.

What about technology? In the early 80's Dr. Borlaugh introduced the Green Revolution with new miracle seeds. Thanks to these new seeds millions of more grain were harvested, and many more people were fed. However, trouble developed in that the crops are more vulnerable to disease and need a number of expensive inputs such as irrigation, petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides. The Green Revolution modernized farmers already better off to the detriment of the poor who could not afford the expensive inputs. Another technology with real controversial possibility is genetically altered food. No study, so far, has found problems but there have been no long run studies. It is still an open question.

The volatility of food prices can be devastating to poor people. A notorious example is the bubble created in 2008 by the financial institution Goldman Sachs. They devised a complicated financial instrument called a Commodity Index of many food products. Many

banks pumped money into buying futures in food products. In the frenzy of futures trading prices quickly escalated and multiplied 10 fold in 3 years. In 2008 the major food conglomerate CARGILL announced an 86 percent increase in profits due to commodity trading. Many investors made a bushel of money without ever seeing an actual bushel of wheat. The end result was an increase in starvation in the world.

In the first eight months of 2010, US agricultural exports increased, corn prices are up and the price of wheat almost doubled. Recently, CARGILL stated that thanks to price volatility their profits rose significantly.

Since the 1980's the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have championed deregulation of the world's food markets. The effect could be devastating..

What about the UN? There are two UN agencies involved with food and agriculture. One is the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), who offer development assistance and expert advice. For example, in 2006 it had 1600 field projects. Another UN agency is the World Food Program (WFP) which is the world's largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger world wide. They save lives by getting food to the hungry fast . In 2010 it brought food assistance to 90 million people in 73 countries.

Periodically. the UN holds a world summit on food security. One very explosive issue between developed and developing countries is farm subsidies and dumping. The current serious situation is also the result of 20 years of under -investment in agriculture in developing countries. Agriculture provides the living for 70 per cent of the world's poor . Support for small farmers in poor countries is essential. The UN is promoting negotiations on regulations to moderate food price fluctuations, limits on dumping and more support for small farmers in poor countries.

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