

Global food crisis is real, but it's not unsolvable

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If the word crisis is vastly overused, to speak of a global food crisis is, if anything, an understatement.

The first signs of trouble appeared in 2000, when global grain stocks declined for the first time in several decades, but it was not until the spring of 2007 that the full gravity of what was occurring became clear. During that year, the prices of the principal food staples -rice, corn, soybeans and wheat - effectively doubled throughout the world.

This was an unprecedented rise, and it reversed more than 50 years of declining prices. Grain prices dropped by 75 per cent between 1950 and the end of the 1980s and then remained low into the first years of the new century.

The results were immediate and devastating: By the most conservative estimates, the number of hungry or chronically malnourished people rose by at least 100 million, to nearly one billion people - that is, to almost one-seventh of the world's population. Food riots and other forms of unrest broke out throughout the world. One good result was that agriculture was restored to its rightful, central place on the development agenda after decades of being the poor stepchild (the

proportion of US foreign aid devoted to agriculture dropped from 17 per cent in 1980 to about 3 per cent in 2006).

But the root causes of the crisis have yet to be properly addressed. This is particularly serious because while global grain prices have declined substantially since 2008, they are poised to rise again. When they do - and specialists agree that they will, at least in the medium term-the costs in terms of both human suffering and political and social upheaval are likely to make the 2007 price crisis pale by comparison.

It is easy to mock the various conferences, emergency meetings and seemingly endless policy documents that have tried to mitigate the threat but so far have achieved little. In fairness, though, responding effectively will be extraordinarily difficult. Despite what some conspiracy minded critics have alleged, the crisis has a number of drivers, each one of which would be challenging enough on its own, but which taken together seem to call for a radical restructuring that is hard to imagine in the current political climate.

These drivers include the diversion of grains in North America and western Europe to biofuel production; higher energy costs, which translate into more expensive chemical fertilizers; and since 2000, financial speculation over staple crops, which causes price fluctuations.

As if this were not bad enough, these changes have been taking place during a period of very rapid population growth. And in some regions with dramatic demographic increases, like sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia, climate change is threatening to lower crop yields at precisely the time that more staple foods urgently need to be produced.

Food emergency

Although everyone agrees there is a food emergency, there is little agreement on what should be done. The dominant approach,

championed and to a considerable extent financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - now the world's principal private funder of agricultural research- holds that the global food crisis is fundamentally the result of both inefficient and insufficient food production. Therefore the solution is what Gordon Conway, the former president of another major philanthropic supporter of this effort, has called 'the doubly green revolution.' Conway has defined this as harnessing "the power of science and technology not just for the better-off, or even the majority, but for those millions of poor and hungry who deserve and have a right to enough to eat:"

Arrayed against this view are the agroecologists, grouped around organisations and coalitions like the Right to Food movement in India and their intellectual supporters, like Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food. They argue that agroecology-the application of ecological principles to agriculture - offers the possibility of increasing crop yields without resorting to expensive, patented inputs like chemical fertilizers or genetically engineered seeds, which are beyond the means of poor smallholder farmers in Africa or Asia. They also argue that the global food crisis is less a technical problem susceptible to a technical solution than a social and political crisis, whose roots and, by extension, solutions, lie in creating a fairer and more accountable world system.

Both sides would probably agree that neither technical innovation nor agroecology can work unless governments are fully committed to reducing the number of hungry and chronically malnourished people. When governments have been committed, progress has been very rapid, as the examples of China, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, and, most brilliantly, Brazil, have demonstrated conclusively over the last three decades. When they 'have not been, as is the case, disgracefully, in India -where the malnutrition rate for children under five stubbornly remains

at 46 per cent, double the average in sub-Saharan Africa-conditions have deteriorated.

But if the global food crisis is real, it is not unsolvable. One of the greatest accomplishments of the 20th century was to make famine - for all of human history a scourge that seemed as inevitable as the other three horsemen of the apocalypse, war, plague, and death - a rarity. Today, famine is almost invariably the product of evil governments, North Korea being the obvious case, or of no government, as in Somalia. The hunger that maims and blights should be consigned to the past, just as the hunger that kills has been.

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