

Food Shortage Is a Myth

By Musafir

We will never willingly run out of food. Shortages are always man made (artificial). John Jeavons' book "How to Grow More Vegetables and Fruits (and Fruits, Nuts, Berries, Grains, and Other Crops) Than You Ever Thought Possible on Less Land Than You Can Imagine." A typical suburban backyard is large enough to feed at least 15 adults. We are not talking crops only, not poultry. 2006 data indicates there is 1.15 acres of arable land per person, world-wide (i.e. 7.68 billion acres / 6.68 billion people).

In 1950s India through the early 1970s, I have personally witnessed so-called famines. All were caused by hoarding by merchants because of government policies adverse to them. Earlier the great famine of Bengal was artificially created by the British. British authorities, fearing a Japanese invasion of British India by way of Bengal, stockpiled food for British soldiers and prevented access to supplies by the Japanese in case of an invasion. Noted economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen holds the view that there was no overall shortage of rice in Bengal in 1943: availability was actually slightly higher than in 1941, when there was no famine.

The fact remains that while harvests of cereal crops worldwide are setting new records, some people have been going hungry. One problem, most of the U.S. land in production goes to produce animal feed, it could produce much more food directly for human consumption. A starving Haitian's need for bread doesn't pay as well as our desire for steak. In these circumstances, meat for one is "worth more than" grain for ten, and a rational farmer will target the former.

Food shortage is a myth. In 1972, the Club of Rome released *The Limits to Growth*, which said if economic growth were allowed to continue, the world would run out of food and commodities; oil disappearing from the earth by 1992. The fact remains that by 1992 countries like India (previously among have-nots) became food exporters. Another reason for the apparent food shortage is the use of food as a weapon. In Sudan and many African countries, food can only flow with the consent of the men with the guns. Each side directs the flow of foreign aid to solidify popular support in its geographic stronghold. In the early 1980s, American officials looked the other way as much of the food they were providing to Ethiopian refugees in Somalia through charities was channeled to guerrillas fighting the Marxist government in Addis Ababa.

In fact, there is plenty of agricultural productivity to feed everyone, and in principle a considerable amount left over for bio-fuels. Food shortage is not the result of singular causes like low rainfall or too many mouths to feed, it is the result of a long series of social, political and economic processes and policies. The problem is miscast so let us eat and let others eat too.

The Looming Global Food Crisis

By Bala Prasad

The looming global food crisis has been anticipated by global experts for years. Food shortages and high prices can be blamed on many factors, including climate change, reduced availability of land for agriculture, growing populations in the poorest parts of the world, increased demand from a growing middle class in China and India, rising fuel costs, and the development of biofuels. Wheat, corn and rice prices have more than doubled in the past two years. Rice shortages of have been especially volatile, and some major exporting nations like Indian and Vietnam are putting exporting bans in place.

As the food shortage crisis deepens, the World Bank is issuing even bleaker warnings about rising poverty and hunger in the developing world. Initially, it estimated that 46 million people in developing countries could be pushed into poverty from the food crisis. Now, that level is up another 7 million. Not surprisingly, children and women seem to be hit hardest of all. The World Bank estimates that the current financial downturn may add between 200,000 and 400,000 additional infant deaths per year on average in the 2009 to 2015 period. That means a total of 1.4 million to 2.8 million more infant deaths, if this crisis continues. In light of these numbers, anyone who suggests we are not heading toward a global food crisis is just wrong.

So, what should be done? First, we should look to the dramatic success of Malawi, a famine-prone country in Africa, which three years ago established a special fund to help its farmers get fertilizer and high-yield seeds. Malawi's harvest doubled after just one year. An international fund based on the Malawi model would cost a mere ten dollars per person annually in the rich world, or ten billion dollars in all. Such a fund could be a very effective means to fight hunger.

The U.S. and Europe should also abandon their policies of subsidizing the conversion of food into biofuels. The U.S. government gives farmers a taxpayer-financed subsidy of fifty-one cents per gallon of ethanol to divert corn from the food and feed-grain supply. There is not a single reason for doling out subsidies that put the world's food supply into a gas tank.

We also need to weatherproof the world's crops as soon and as effectively as possible. For a poor farmer, something as simple as a farm pond (which collects rainwater to be used for emergency irrigation in a dry spell) can make the difference between a bountiful crop and a famine.

The current food crisis provides not only a warning but an opportunity. We can combat these problems but we must act rapidly. What is clear is that if things do not change, we are heading toward some very dire situations.