

JustComment

www.erc.org.au

A joint publication of Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education &
The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

Food today... what about tomorrow?

'Please, sir, I want some more,' says the hungry Oliver Twist. Obviously, he had not imbibed the culture of the work house which Charles Dickens described as a place 'without the inconvenience of too much food.'

The plaintive cry for 'more' around our world is getting louder as families in the developed countries begin to experience hunger along with the dire needs of people in developing countries that has led to food riots, violence and death in Peru and Haiti, Senegal and Egypt, the Philippines and Cambodia. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Association 854 million people of the world's 6.5 billion people do not receive their minimum daily food requirement.

If energy and food prices have increased in developed countries, they have posed a greater problem for the 5.1 billion people in developing nations – roughly a billion of whom live on the equivalent of one dollar a day. The 83% increase in food prices over the last three years has been catastrophic for people on the margins of the global economy.¹ Access to adequate food is a right protected by international law, yet the ongoing emergency may reinforce long-entrenched patterns of exclusion and discrimination. The crisis carries severe repercussions for people already living in precarious and marginalised situations, particularly women and children, minorities and people with disabilities.²

Whilst the world's intelligentsia was raging over global warming, global hunger slipped under the radar. It remained unnoticed until the developed world began to feel the effects of rising food prices. Those who had nothing to do with rising

prices were pushed into poverty.

The current food crisis stems from a perverse convergence of several factors, including distortions in supply and demand, unfair trade practices, as well as skewed policies involving incentives or subsidies³.

Some Pressures

In the *World Economic Outlook* released in April 2008, the International Monetary Fund spelt out why food is becoming scarcer and costlier.

Structural changes in the world economy have caused rising food prices. More people to feed and rich diets in some emerging countries along with a rapidly emerging middle class in India and China and other developing countries has lifted some of the constraints of poverty, and has allowed people to aspire to eat food that they traditionally could not afford, such as meat. Indeed the demand for meat from across all developing countries has doubled since 1980.

Diversification of staple crops (principally corn) into biofuel production and the West's push to develop subsidised biofuels might have reduced some dependency on oil imports but created food shortages.

Climate change is taking its toll. Droughts and floods are affecting harvests. Destruction of crops from natural disasters in Bangladesh and Burma, and severe drought in Australia, has reduced food supply. Bangladesh, always flood prone, had two major floods and a big cyclone in 2007,



destroying 2 million tonnes of rice. Available arable land has decreased due to the rising sea levels and increased salinity in coastal areas. Worldwide, an area of fertile soil the size of Ukraine is lost every year because of drought, deforestation and climate instability.⁴

Urbanisation and other competing land uses have reduced the area available for growing food. In Bangladesh, it is estimated the area under crop has shrunk by as much as a third since independence in 1971. Food stockpiles have been allowed to run down, mostly to save money, leaving the world less able to deal with shortages.

There is also increasing demand from a rising world population which is expected to grow from 6.2 billion today to 9.5 billion by 2050. The World Bank predicts global demand for food will double by 2030⁵.

Diets are changing radically in nations such as China, India, Brazil and Russia

where economic growth has boosted meat consumption. As cattle and chickens are fed on corn – it takes 8kg of grain to produce 1kg of beef – prices have risen and the strain on the food chain is now apparent.⁶ Bruce Friedrich, vice president of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, notes that the amount of grain being fed to animals worldwide is about eight times the amount going for biofuels. He cites the United Nations report, *Livestock's Long Shadow*, which states that eating meat is 'one of the most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global.' The same report also claims that eating meat causes almost 40 percent more greenhouse gas emissions than all the cars, trucks, and planes in the world combined. The report concludes that the meat industry 'should be a major policy focus when dealing with problems of land degradation, climate change and air pollution, water shortage and water pollution, and loss of biodiversity.'⁷

The call to cut fossil fuel emissions has resulted in a surge in Western demand for biofuels. The diversion of grain into ethanol plants for fuel rather than onto tables for food is a serious moral and political issue. To produce a gallon of ethanol from corn requires almost as much energy (mostly coal burning) as it produces.⁸ Biofuels take up land and crops that might otherwise go towards feeding people, which largely explains why food prices have shot up. They typically require nitrogen fertilisers, which causes the soil to emit nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas. Biofuels also require ploughing, harvesting, and processing – all of which use energy, often supplied by burning fossil fuels. For a supposedly clean energy source, biofuels are often surprisingly dirty; some may not help tackle global warming but make it worse.⁹

The Bolivian and Peruvian presidents have both attacked the use of biofuels

which have made food too expensive. Bolivian president, Evo Morales, has said that developed nations must accept that the problems created by biofuels in developing countries were partly their responsibility. He said 'it is not an internal problem, it is an external problem'. Questioning these countries on moral grounds he asked: 'How important is life and how important are cars? So I say life first and cars second.'¹⁰ Friends of the Earth has also warned the European Union (EU) of the perils of expanding biofuel use in Latin America. In 2007, the EU agreed on a target of 10% biofuel use for transport by 2020.¹¹

The new market for biofuels has raised grain prices. Corn is being used to produce energy and the market is anticipating hugely increased production in the coming decade. American president George Bush wants 15 per cent of American cars to run on biofuels by 2017, which will mean trebling maize production. Europe has set a transport fuels target of 5.75 per cent from biofuels by 2010. As a result, the price of corn has begun to track that of oil quite closely.¹²

There is increasing concern about the rush to biofuels. Britain's new chief scientist, Professor John Beddington, has said cutting down rainforest to produce biofuel crops was 'profoundly stupid'. It was, he said, 'very hard to imagine how we can see a world growing enough crops to produce renewable energy and, at the same time, meet the enormous increase in the demand for food'. The soaring cost of oil has another impact: it increases the price of fertiliser, and also the costs of food processing and transport¹³.

Floods in central China this year displaced millions of people and devastated rice and corn crops. Overall China's grain harvest has fallen by 10 per cent over the past seven years. In 2007, Australia experienced its worst drought

OK, I want to talk about Ireland
Specifically I want to talk about
the "famine"

About the fact that there never
really was one

There was no "famine"

See Irish people were only
allowed to eat potatoes

All of the other food

Meat, fish, vegetables

Were shipped out of the country
under armed guard

To England while the Irish people
starved

**Sinead O'Connor, "Famine", from the
Universal Mother album.**

for more than a century, causing the wheat harvest to fall by 60 per cent. The United Kingdom's wheat harvest is expected to be 10 per cent down in 2008, partly because of flooding.¹⁴

Government policies do not help: the rich world subsidises agriculture not to feed the world but to enrich its farmers¹⁵.

Conclusion

The failure to act will put at risk other fundamental rights, including the right to health or to education, when people are forced to forego competing basic necessities or services in order to feed themselves and their families.

Empowering people to secure food for themselves and for their family in a sustainable way is central to a human rights approach to the food crisis. This is necessary to prevent further civil unrest, as well as violations of civil and political rights in response to protest.

Can we continue to promote energy self-sufficiency and at the same time undercut food productivity worldwide? Energy conservation is not only to protect the environment but also to feed the planet which is now 'without the inconvenience of too much food'¹⁶.

Full references on the ERC website.



Edmund Rice Centre

AWARENESS • ADVOCACY • ACTION

9 Alexandra Ave, Croydon 2132

Phone (02) 9745 9700

Fax (02) 9745 9770

Email zeena@erc.org.au

Web www.erc.org.au



Australian Catholic University
Brisbane Sydney Canberra Ballarat Melbourne

179 Albert Rd, Strathfield 2135

Phone (02) 9739 2100

Fax (02) 02 9739 2105

This material is the sole property of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice & Community Education and the School of Education of the Australian Catholic University. Reproduction is not permitted without the permission of these organisations.