

Today's Global Food and Energy Crisis: The Way Forward

SUMMARY

The United Nations World Food Program (WFP) has described the global food shortage and soaring cost of staple foods as a “silent tsunami”. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), more than 852 million people, about 13% of the world population are starving.

Food crops should not be diverted towards bio-fuels. Farming seaweed is an alternative. Solar energy must be looked at critically. Foreign governments must eliminate artificial barriers. Governments must see to the provision of reliable irrigation systems and provide incentives. Everyone must get involved. Backyard farming and the use of energy saving bulbs must be encouraged.

INTRODUCTION

“While many are worried about filling their gas tanks, many others around the world are struggling to fill their stomachs.” Robert Zoellick, World Bank President.

Over the past 18 months, the global price of staple foods has spiraled upwards due to the global food shortage, described by the UN World Food Program as a “silent tsunami”. The price of rice has tripled, maize increased by two-thirds and wheat has doubled.

The essay assesses the state of the current food and energy crisis and suggests measures that should be taken to directly combat the problem.

THE STATE OF TODAY'S GLOBAL FOOD AND ENERGY CRISIS

At the World Future Energy Summit held in Abu Dhabi, early last year, Prince Charles underlined the importance of utilizing the world's natural resources responsibly and sustainably as well as developing clean technologies and future energy sources.

In April 2008, the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown hosted a food summit to discuss the growing food crisis. At the meeting, the World Food Program Executive Director, Josette Sheeran revealed that, an additional 100 million people, previously not requiring food assistance, are now not able to buy food.

Early 2008, India announced that it was suspending most rice exports in order to rebuild its reserves. A few weeks later, Vietnam, whose rice crop was hit by a major insect infestation during the harvest, announced a four-month suspension of exports to ensure that enough would be available for its domestic market. India and Vietnam together normally account for 30% of all rice exports.

In November 2008, one of the strongest cyclones wiped out million tones of rice and severely damaged the wheat crop in Bangladesh. Bad weather also struck Burma's key rice-growing region. In Ghana, heavy floods hit the farmlands of major food crops growing areas.

Furthermore, the world is running out of limited resources such as fossil fuels and is not creating enough renewable resources to compensate.

THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS

The rapid food price rises and shortage can be attributed to several factors. Population growth, below average harvests, changing climatic conditions and a burgeoning bio-fuels sector competing for foods have put the stress on food prices.

The irony is that, bio-fuels which is intended to create new forms of energy to make the planet 'greener' has led to high food prices and starvation. The World Bank has said that a boost in bio-fuels production was largely to blame for an 83% increase in food prices over the last three years.

Advanced economies, though recognizing the threat that high food prices pose to poorer countries, have been slow to address the crisis due to their own energy needs.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the International Monetary Fund, has labeled the food-to-fuel production as a 'crisis of humanity'. Both Strauss-Kahn and Zoellick have said that

the current food crisis threatens to destroy the gains made since 2000 in reducing poverty around the world.

Political instability is also a major contributing factor to the energy and food crisis.

Government restrictions on production and trade in agricultural products - namely, trade distorting barriers such as subsidies, tariffs and quotas have also played a part in global food price rises.

Increased in the world population is another major cause. Up to 100 million people are being added to the world's population each year.

MY IDEA FOR A SOLUTION

Crisis demands change. One solution will not work. There must be a dedicated effort of a whole plethora of solutions to combat the crisis.

This means a global re-commitment to agricultural research and development, and investment in improving energy and food productivity.

In a world where there is hunger and poverty, there is no policy justification for diverting food crops towards bio-fuels. Farming seaweed is an alternative. In Costa Rica and Japan, seaweed farming has been re-established to produce energy.

Governments also need to seriously consider about reform and re-ignite the World Trade Organization's Doha Round of global trade reform. They must not intervene to impose limits on food exports, nor distort the flow of food stocks to the production of bio-fuels.

One area where change can make a world of difference is trade barriers. Foreign governments must abandon their trade distorting subsidies, tariffs and other artificial barriers, which only mire production by sending the wrong market signals to global farmers.

Incentives such as farm materials, storage facilities and capital injection must be made available to make the sector more vibrant especially in developing countries. Government must also see to the provision of reliable irrigation systems at farming areas to facilitate year long farming.

Again, if every home planted an organic garden, the dramatic increase of supply would drive down prices and few would go hungry. Backyard and schoolyard farming should be encouraged. Organic and local farms also dramatically reduce energy use in the agricultural sector while safely sequestering in the soil large amounts of greenhouse gases. Local and less processed foods means less packaging, less additives and less transport thereby improving society's well-being.

Larger crop growth is also possible using probiotics. Plants double their growth, are stronger and resist diseases better.

Solar energy must be looked at critically. More solar energy hits the earth in one hour than all the energy the world consumes in a year. There must be a transition to sustainable forms of energy, a moral code which companies should follow. Investment in sustainable technologies and government grants is essential.

Finally and most importantly everyone can do something and should have the moral obligation to do so. People must be aware of the difference they can make by for example switching to energy saving light bulbs. Citizens must also become involved in political processes to advocate their needs and ideas. They must demand healthy and sustainable food and energy policies from their local and state public officials.

CONCLUSIONS

Yes, change is possible. However, easy it is to suggest solutions, implementation is another matter. The implementation of the above recommendations will see the world exit this "silent tsunami" and the energy crisis.