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Faced with a food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?

Abstract

Moving away from the consumerist mental-makeup and towards one where happiness and thereby contentment are priorities is social well-being. Re-assessing the way we use natural resources, eating locally and investing in alternative energy sources play an important role in achieving this. Global forums that co-ordinate and encourage these improvements should be given priority within every governmental institution. Awareness about the role of individual responsibilities should become an educational movement. These are the precepts on which our sense and intelligence have to act upon – this tipping point has to be hastened as the clock is ticking.

Many attempts have been made to describe social well-being when this is a state of affairs where the basic needs of the populace are met. A healthy society is one where income levels cover basic needs; unemployment is insignificant, easy access to social, medical and educational services are available and where individual dignity is revered. The disparity between a want and need-based society is the reason for underlying unrest, world-over. Rampant consumerism and free-market economics have skewed a contented society where the socio-economic balance is finely calibrated. This is most apparent in the way the food and energy crisis is mismanaged.

We have put ourselves in a predicament because of our complacency and energy intensive lifestyles. The misuse of fossil fuels is finally threatening the well-being of 'Our Home' and its biodiversity. Climate changes due to global warming looms like an ominous cloud ready to rain us under. Solutions to prevent this flood of problems call for a mass revolution where society reassesses the choices made, governments the way they prioritize and industrialists the way they manufacture, market and distribute.

The pressing need currently in order to achieve the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) is a council of individuals in every country dedicated solely towards alleviating our problems. International bodies that regulate food distribution and control manufacture should be more aggressive in their approach in order to overcome these crises. Import of food that is energy intensive should be controlled; instead, resources should be spent on boosting local producers. This in turn supports small-scale farms and reduces fuel use for transportation. Movement of food should only be encouraged where surplus production is redirected towards an area when there is a shortfall, at subsidized rates.

A body that oversees, categorizes, quantifies and regulates alternative sources of energy should be set up. It should become mandatory that every country should start investing in alternative sources of energy and weaning itself away from fossil fuel with clear targets set for the next 10 years. Mass consumerism has led to over-production of many goods with tonnes of waste produced. A forum that constantly re-assesses and controls manufacture of all products and ways to curb raw material

usage and energy expenditure is essential. Greening every aspect of human-lifestyle should become a priority if we are to meet these targets.

Regardless of economic situation, GDP of nations, education and lifestyle, it is time for people of the world to accept their responsibility in contributing towards these problems. Education should play a role in impressing upon the minds of children and young adults the importance of societal responsibility. Change will come rapidly and surely, if every person takes accountability to reassess the way they use the planet's resources; without expecting the next person to pick up the slack.

Consumer choice plays an enormous role in managing the food and energy crisis. In order to make this a powerful tool, there has to be increased awareness of food production which is not only energy intensive but also puts enormous pressure on natural resources in every step. It is essential to reassess and revert to simpler ways of growing food - small-scale, organic farms that have been proven to increase yield per acre; reduce top soil loss and maintain soil fertility should be encouraged. Organic meat farms which manage animals in humane ways; do not add antibiotics, growth-hormones to their feed reduces associated problems like antibiotic-resistance, cancer etc. Government subsidies to such farms will reduce costs to make healthier eating more affordable.

A World Bank estimate states that there has been an 83% increase in food prices due to growing of biofuels in the last 3 years. Using agricultural land to support the production of crops for biofuels should be condemned as biofuels are not as carbon efficient as other sources of energy. Bio-waste from food production can be diverted towards production of biogas, cost-effective sources like algae which yield up to 10,000 gallons/acre of biofuel is not fully explored. Landfill mining for resources and tapping of methane should be explored.

The developing world's priority is to conserve agricultural land, curbing sale of agricultural land for housing and industrial development and reclamation of contaminated land. The World Bank figures that 33 million can face unrest from food shortages and we have already seen riots in parts of the world. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon warned up to \$20bn a year was needed to alleviate the crisis. People will not divert attention towards uplifting other social plagues like over-population, pollution, disease control, education etc unless these needs are met. Compromising on quality nourishment causes countries already burdened with epidemics like AIDS, malaria, Hepatitis-B etc to increase their health budget or get international aid which puts their economies in further debt. Distribution channels should be re-assessed and made more effective so that starvation is prevented. There are people living on less than \$2 a day and when food prices increase, they are horrendously affected so rich countries should bear in mind that their food wastage can feed people in poorer parts of the world.

Old adages like 'think local, act global'; 'waste not, want not' should become slogans for the impending revolution. Ultimately there has to be a major catalyst to act as a precursor to change, to bring about a paradigm shift in the way that social well-being is assessed. On the perilous road filled with indecision, arguments and power-play on one side; there are people dying without food and rioting for fuel on the other. Food and energy, fuel global economy and unless people are fed and their well-being taken care of, 'business as usual' will grind to a halt faster than the current financial crisis.