

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

SUMMARY

Generally, the growth of a country is based on its production and consumption of two vital needs of people – food and fuel. Due to environmental pollution by the combustion of fossil fuels, the concept of eco- friendly products such as bio-fuels is introduced. The production of bio-fuels from the feedstock resulted in the food crisis. Both natural factors and human activities are responsible for the present food-energy crisis in the world. The management of this crisis situation has to be done at global level as well as at national level. If politicians, researchers, scientists and general public join hands together, then, a solution to the problem can be arrived.

Food and energy are the two vital needs of a society. One might see symbiotic relationship between them. They supplement each other's growth and development. A crisis on one invariably affects the other. As far as consumption of food and fuel is concerned there is no comparison between what is now and what was five decades ago. Technology has changed the life style of the people today which one could not have imagined in the past.

Two decades ago, we were awakened by the change in global climate due to environmental pollution. Most of the pollution was due to carbon dioxide, which is the major pollutant emitted during the combustion of fossil fuels. Scientists and researchers turned their focus on alternative energy sources. Now, environmentalists introduced the concept of bio-degradable or eco-friendly products. One such product is bio-fuel. When the biomass of the feed stock is processed, it is converted into bio-fuel. The idea soon caught up the imagination of energy starved countries. Many of them imitated the production of bio-fuel from maize and ethanol from sugarcane. Annually, about 100 million tonnes of food grains are used to produce bio-fuel. Many countries devote nearly 30% of cultivated maize grains to be converted to ethanol to overcome the fuel crisis.

Food converted to fuel?! Sounds curious! But this is a fact and seems to be the order of the day. But little did the world realize the consequences of this. It leads to increase in food prices, an increase that was phenomenal which resulted in revolt by many people belonging to several countries of the world. That was the warning sign that all was not well with the consumption of food.

The food-energy crisis was further complicated by the drying up of oil wells which compelled oil producing countries to hike the price of oil to unaffordable limits. To complicate matters there was a fall in the generation of hydro electricity as several countries were affected by poor rainfall. Depletion of coal reserves also affected the

thermal power generation. Also, the production of electricity from other sources such as nuclear energy requires high input resources and is economically not viable.

Globally, the food and energy crisis the resulted in political, economic and social instability. How can a society think of its well being amidst such a crisis situation?

The crisis management need to be done at two levels – at centralized / global level and at decentralized / national or regional level. An autonomous International Governing Body for Food and Fuel (IGBFF) should be created with all the countries made compulsory members of this body. The representatives of the various countries could meet to set guidelines and action plans to carry out judicial and beneficial management of existing resources.

The geographical location of a country / region makes it rich in fuel or food but poor in the other areas. Such nations should be identified and grouped together. IGBFF could arrange for mutual exchange of materials among them. It may be worth mentioning here that the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) conducted a high-level conference on World Food Security in June 2008. About \$1 billion aid was allotted to 60 countries affected by food price hike. The governing body might form Executive Committees to monitor the action plans and to see to that the relief reached the appropriate people at the appropriate time.

The scarcity of coal or petroleum arises not always due to the depletion of fossil fuels but their production is not funded enough by the policy-makers generally. Such political situations in some countries lead to artificial scarcity of fossil fuels. Appropriate funding towards the production of food and fuel should be prioritized during the budget allocation. Small scale electricity production / fuel production based on alternative energy sources such as wind, solar, biomass waste etc. should be encouraged to meet the domestic needs.

Whether at the global level or at the national level, the flow of aid from the government or its agencies to the beneficiary should be smooth without bottleneck or be subjected to the forces of corruption. This can be safeguarded only by efficient leadership.

The governments are expected to invest largely in education, agricultural research and biomass fuel production. Research should focus on high yields of both bio-fuel crops such as maize and sugarcane, and food crops such as rice and wheat. Research in genetic engineering will lead to the production of new varieties of drought – tolerant and drought – resistant crops.

To conserve fuel, public should be encouraged to follow car-pooling, travel by mass transport system etc. Technological development in designing automobile

engines which can run on dual fuels, both fossil fuel and bio fuel, is the need of hour to overcome the fuel crisis.

With an exponential increase in world population, we are faced with the challenge of producing enough food and fuel for meeting the general and particular needs. The dual objective can be achieved only if there is change in the attitude of the people across the world; they should put forward humanity against prejudices and politics.