

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

In January the UK government launched the campaign 'Change 4 life'. The accompanying slogan reads: "Eat well, Move more, Live longer". The campaign, aimed at children and parents, highlights an attempt to tackle obesity, diabetes and heart disease; often considered to be some of the most serious public health problems in the rich world. These issues can be seen as a by-product of an affluent society, for whom energy is abundant and food comes fast. Whilst the UK does not reflect global society, it does represent trends in the rich Global North: a model that many 'developing countries' are being forced to replicate.

The UK economy is built upon cheap energy, we consume at a dizzying rate and many consumption patterns are illogical; for example, in the supermarkets apples from South Africa are bought at a lower cost than their British counterparts! But, despite our wealth, society has become fragmented. The fast pace of society has driven people to products for time efficiency, rather than use traditional social networks. Faced with an, energy and food crisis, we may be forced to learn to slow down and instead use our communities for support.

In answering the question how society can improve it's wellbeing in the face of an energy and food crisis, I argue that rebuilding our communities in order to localise our lives will not only allow food and energy security, but also improve wellbeing dramatically. I will briefly discuss transport and home energy, and then look at the role of food and the community.

In England, 45% of people have access to one car, and 27% to more than one car (UK statistics, 2000) and most of the time people travel alone in their car. Public transport allows people the chance to interact, a rarity in the UK's closed curtain society. However, this main alternative is largely seen as slow, expensive and uncomfortable. If the government is serious about the impending energy crises they must raise taxes on cars whilst at the same time heavily subsidise and invest in public transport. Buses could be run off recycled vegetable oil and include the capacity to carry bicycles. Trains, which can run off electricity, could be powered by renewable sources, lines could be extended reversing Dr. Beeching's axe of the 1960s.

More promotion of, and infrastructure for cycling and walking is required. Cycling in particular is perceived as unsafe, there is therefore a need for many more cycle paths and lanes. Whilst saving energy, cycling and walking are beneficial physically and mentally (Sustrans), and at the same time save people lot of money!

In the face of an energy crisis less energy needs to be consumed, even with renewable sources society cannot continue to consume energy at the rate it

does. As the change for life website says “with so many opportunities to watch TV and play computer games...we don’t move about as much...which means that 9 out of 10 kids could grow up with dangerous amounts of fat in their bodies” (Change4life, 2009). Perhaps a system whereby the energy on the grid was rationed, with each person allowed the same quota could be effective (if not carried out in a dogmatic fashion). This would act as a real incentive to turn off the TV and go outside!

The current mindset is to maintain the status quo through renewable energies, including biofuels. The department for environment and rural affairs (Defra) are awarding grants to farmers to encourage the growth of biomass crops. But Biofuels in themselves will create a food crisis through replacing crops for consumption. Instead massive reductions in energy consumption in the UK can be made through localizing almost everything, in particular food. The UK does not produce anywhere near enough food for its population, but produces mainly cereals for the global market, a system that is only sustained through subsidies from the EU (The Guardian, 2008). Food is cheap, and supermarkets that hold the monopoly keep down prices. If the commodity market collapsed tomorrow, we would be in the depths of a food crisis. Supermarkets have such a wasteful system that in the developing world, 40% of the food harvested is lost before it’s consumed due to inadequate processing storage and transport (The Guardian, 2007)

The majority of society has a detached perception of food. Our consumption if continued, will force Britain as well as other countries into a crisis. Take meat for example, the meat consumed within the UK is largely fed with Soya from South America, robbing the region of food security and using masses of energy to reach the UK (The Ecologist, 2009). Less meat needs to be eaten. Britons now eat 50% more meat than 40 years ago; this has implications for wellbeing (The Guardian, 2008). The price of meat should reflect its *real* price, how much energy it has used, and the food potential it has replaced.

The UK needs to produce more of its own food. Defra and the EU should be awarding grants for land to be used as allotments, or for Community supported agriculture Programmes (CSA). Being outside lifts moods, improves physical and mental wellbeing and helps people to connect with others (Ecominds, 2009). I also believe that but by knowing the grower or indeed growing food yourself, then the 4 million tonnes of food that Britons throw away each year (Gaurdian, 2007), may mostly be saved from the bin.

Faced with energy and food crisis it is for the most part, illogical to devise macro solutions. Instead communities need to be able to react to the issues that a food and energy crisis could cause. By joining together to discuss and devise ways to re adjust their community, the community would hopefully become stronger, people may feel more supported and this would greatly improve wellbeing. The ‘transition towns’ movement in the UK is already taking steps towards creating a localised society. In the face of a food and energy crisis the government and big business’ need to stop chasing excess profit, as currently this does not correlate with a just and sustainable world. If the right route is taken, the government will not have to fund campaigns such

as 'change4life' because we *will* eat well, move more and as a result live better lives, and hopefully the rest of the world will too.

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