

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition

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

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Summary:

Food and energy are becoming scarce resources and with today's growth rates, we could be confronted with shortages in less than 50 years. Alternative energy sources are being researched, sometimes in the detriment of other resources, such as food. Both poor and rich nations are struggling to find solutions to the food crisis, but are finding that long-term measures might take too long to satisfy current needs. Billions are being invested in research, but too little in awareness and resource management. Perhaps the ultimate solution comes not only from new technologies but from more rationally using the ones we have.

Essay:

Today, the world is facing several serious crises that endanger the stability and well-functioning of the international economic system, the relative and fragile state of world peace, but most of all the well being of people from many nations across the globe. Whereas we have no way of knowing what tomorrow brings, analysts' predictions indicate a worsening of the global climate situation, a reduction of available resources and a drastic shortage of both food and energy as the world's population continues to grow. If preemptive actions are not taken now, we risk serious consequences.

Economic growth and development have been the key terms used to express the direction in which human activities should be oriented. Starting with the 19th century and up to the present – the most important concept in economy is “growth” and having as much of it as possible. Yet in a time of resource shortage, general financial instability and grave social issues, pursuing such a goal could lead to an increase in the intensity of the problems society is faced with today. The current energy consumption required to keep world growth rates up would drain the world's oil resources within 40 years, according to a study by the IEA¹. However, research done by the EIA² indicates that world energy consumption will not merely maintain its current level, but increase by 2% annually. Thus, maintaining growth levels would only temporarily inflate a bubble of prosperity and well-being that would eventually burst, leading to: a sharp decrease in living standards; conflict, when shortage eventually occurs; and, in the meanwhile - energy monopolies, in the form of countries possessing the world's energy resources and manipulating with them in the detriment of all society.

In an attempt to diminish the world energy crisis, many countries rushed to implement a new and seemingly promising technology – bio-fuels. The concept behind them is quite simple – a renewable and simple to implement energy source that can be obtained through agriculture in many parts of the world. Unfortunately, it is the crop-to-fuel production process yield that led to severe criticisms of this project. With immense fertile terrains needed to produce the amount of crops required to generate fuel, many companies originating from industrial states resorted to the acquisition of land overseas, in less developed countries. Much of the land, meant to supply the local population with food started to be used for energy production. Although, contributing to a reduction of costs associated with the import of oil, bio-fuel production caused a significant increase in food prices. After the implementation of several bio-fuel programs in South Africa, maize and sugar prices increased by 28 and, respectively,

¹ International Energy Agency

² American Energy Information Administration

13 percent in one year according to the Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme NGO. In countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala, ActionAid documented an important number of instances where locals were being pressured into selling their farmland to bio-fuel producing companies. In many instances, this led to a severe degradation of the farmers' living standards and a considerable reduction of their welfare.

It is thus that trying to solve one problem, another was aggravated. The world food crisis, largely caused by the increase in global population, energy prices and the failing world economy threatens people from poor nations that might no longer be able to afford ensuring their populace with food. Concurrently, according to polls conducted by the Washington Post in the US, even Americans are concerned with the increasing food prices.

With the enormous amount of media coverage that the food and energy crises received, some analysts stipulate that only radical change could presently save the world. A total restructuring of the world's economic system so as to represent a decay model³ portraying the link between the reduction of resources and the needed cutback in consumption, infrastructure and even population, is what researchers suggest might be the answer. However changing the whole system would take too long for it to be effective, not to mention the enormous costs associated with such an undertaking.

As a result of the world food crisis growing food locally has become an ever more widespread practice within developed countries of the world. Not only does it confer people the security of knowing that the food price increase won't affect them, but it also helps cut energy costs, as importing food requires energy in the form of fuel used to transport the goods. However, not enough people have the time to grow food themselves, nor the money to invest in local farming groups that would supply them with provisions. Therefore, the effectiveness of this solution is also limited.

Although most solutions that either attempt massive change or that require large investments will undoubtedly have an impact, calculations as to when exactly we might notice an improvement of the food, resource and climate situation are not very encouraging.

Instead of trying to maintain our current lifestyle and looking for ways to somehow compensate for our massive pollution and immense consumption, we should in fact focus on building a new way of life, with new trends, from the ground up. Money should be spent on global pollution and resource scarcity awareness programs with the main focus being on the youth. National education curriculums should be modified to reflect current global issues. Through those national K-12 standards, the young generation should be taught about resource efficiency and the imminent disaster resulting from squandering the few supplies we have left. Also, more youth eco-activist groups must emerge around the world to inspire and motivate the youth to think in an environmentally friendly fashion. Finally, through these initiatives and through the continuous media and state emphasis on our current food and resource situation, new day-to-day moral principles and values that everyone accepts and respects would be created. With time, environmentalism and resource efficiency will have become widespread therefore will have reduced the burden that humans inflict on our planet. It is through simple, easy to implement change that we can remedy today's problems – all we need is involvement!

³ As described in the work of Richard Day