

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

Summary

The world food and energy crises are highly interlinked problems stemming from the fact that we have largely rejected the practices of food cultivation in gardens, the traditional focus of all human societies, which has brought them knowledge about nature, patience, health and enjoyment. Much more of the food we eat could be produced in and around our society, in many small, diverse food gardens, protecting the soil, enriching our diets and teaching children the cultural value of food and its centrality to our existence, while simultaneously reducing our dangerous and unsustainable dependency on unrenovable energy and capricious financial markets.

Food, Energy, Water and Climate: The Four Integrated Crises

The culmination of food, energy, water and climate crises this century pose a significant threat to the survival of mankind, and not just the 79.9 per cent living on less than \$10 day.

The four “crises” are actually facets of the same problem, and that problem largely has to do with the way human’s relation to Earth has been framed. It is a perception that segregates food, energy, water and climate problems from one another, commodifying the very things that constitute survival, and subjecting them to the unreflexive vagaries of the international market.

The financial events of 2008, the spike in oil prices and the peak in world food prices have highlighted the urgency for a complete reevaluation of how societies are organized; how humans, their environment, and their sustenance have been separated from one another, when they were always tightly interlinked.

A report published this month, “*The Feeding of the Nine Billion*,” stated that as a result of the hike in commodity prices, another 100 million undernourished people were added to the pre-hike level of 850 million. These are startling figures, and the images of malnourished children all over the world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to present a picture of hopelessness that induces tired resignation from many corners of the Western world.

Hope Starts With a New Perspective

However, the situation is certainly not hopeless, only urgent. The capriciousness of global markets, and the recently exposed irresponsibility of those controlling global finance, have demonstrated more clearly than ever before the folly of separating and commodifying every element of human existence. Bolivia showed in 2004 how determination and hope led the people to block the privatization of water, which would have excluded most of their population from access.

In asking how we can improve the well-being of society, we are faced with two implicit foundational questions: what is well-being, and who is our society? Should communities have affordable food in their supermarkets, or should they have improved access and ownership rights to land for cultivating food gardens? Is society the whole world? Can actions in my own community have knock-on effects to communities in Angola? Certainly, they can.

The phrase “think globally, act locally” marks a good starting point. As climate change has begun to demonstrate, we are, in the words of one ecologist “all downstream of someone else” and therefore, have to stretch our imagination of society to include the world. This is easier to do, when we reconsider the ways we are already interacting with the world on a daily basis: through our imports and exports.

Even as some governments realize the need to lessen their reliance on foreign oil and gas, we are daily wasting vast amounts of energy and resources processing, packaging and transporting food, more of which could be grown at home, in schools, universities, even offices.

The problems are interlinked; but nature has a diversity of natural solutions. Many of these ideas have been well demonstrated by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, the co-developers of “permaculture” – an integrative form of existence, combining agriculture, horticulture, architecture, ecology, land use, and economy.

The crucial insight of their approach was to realize that sustainable, diverse and resilient food supplies rely on good soil, something which takes thousands of years to accumulate and

which we have lost in vast quantities globally in the last century. To have good soil requires plants, to bind the earth together, a source of nutrients, water and shade.

As we contemplate the spread of deserts, the threat of food shortages, we continue to reduce fertile land to desert through intensive processes that toxify, leach, dry out and waste the earth we depend on. Meanwhile, the peace, learning, exercise, culture and solace found throughout history by humans interacting with the earth and the diversity of life forms it supports – when allowed to maintain its wholeness as a system – has been lost, with people less and less able to produce their own food or access healthy ecosystems. Instead, society is reduced to dependency on currency, external and damaging mechanical production, fluctuating climate and international financial markets.

Subsistence Is Not a Commodity

There are good arguments for commodifying the products which we don't depend on for survival, and there are good reasons for establishing property rights, because it binds people to land, supporting long-term visions. But a growing majority of the world is increasingly excluded from its right to *survival*, because survival itself has been commodified.

Food is the cultural focal point of all human history. It is what humans unite over, what they share, what they learn and teach and communicate about; our taste and enjoyment contribute fundamentally to our well-being, be it physical health, mental stimulation, creative expression or social bonding. Not only food consumption and preparation, but food production, needs to be reintegrated into the education of children, the next generations who will have control of the planet's resources.

A love of nature, an understanding of its diversity, complexity and harmony, is crucial to changing the way we view our survival and well-being. Permaculture promotes the idea of keeping soil permanently covered with vegetation, the idea of cultivating food forests, instead of dried out monocultures. A diverse garden can produce substantial quantities of food, and the excess can be sold locally or shared. Bringing food productive cultural practices closer to home, into our communities and gardens, even urban spaces and rooftops, is to reduce our dependence on energy and financial markets, to improve our living environments with oxygen and intrigue, and to restore our perception of shared food production as the sacred cultural basis of our existence.