

Monthly Review

The World Food Crisis

Sources and Solutions

by Fred Magdoff

An acute food crisis has struck the world in 2008. This is on top of a longer-term crisis of agriculture and food that has already left billions hungry and malnourished. In order to understand the full, dire implications of what is happening today it is necessary to look at the interaction between these short-term and long-term crises. Both crises arise primarily from the for-profit production of food, fiber, and now biofuels, and the rift between food and people that this inevitably generates.

‘Routine’ Hunger before the Current Crisis

Of the more than 6 billion people living in the world today, the United Nations estimates that close to 1 billion suffer from chronic hunger. But this number, which is only a crude estimate, leaves out those suffering from vitamin and nutrient deficiencies and other forms of malnutrition. The total number of food insecure people who are malnourished or lacking critical nutrients is probably closer to 3 billion—about half of humanity. The severity of this situation is made clear by the United Nations estimate of over a year ago that approximately 18,000 children die *daily* as a direct or indirect consequence of malnutrition (Associated Press, February 18, 2007).

Lack of production is rarely the reason that people are hungry. This can be seen most clearly in the United States, where despite the production of more food than the population needs, hunger remains a significant problem. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2006 over 35 million people lived in food-insecure households, including 13 million children. Due to a lack of food adults living in over 12 million households could not eat balanced meals and in over 7 million families someone had smaller portions or skipped meals. In close to 5 million families, children did not get enough to eat at some point during the year.

In poor countries too, it is not unusual for large supplies of wasted and misallocated food to exist in the midst of widespread and persistent hunger. A few years ago a *New York Times* article had a story with the following headline “Poor in India Starve as Surplus Wheat Rots” (December 2, 2002). As a *Wall Street Journal* headline put it in 2004 “Want Amid Plenty, An Indian Paradox: Bumper Harvests and Rising Hunger” (June 25, 2004).

No ‘Right to Food’

Hunger and malnutrition generally are symptoms of a larger underlying problem—poverty in an economic system that recognizes, as Rachel Carson put it, no other gods but those of profit and production. Food is treated in almost all of the world’s countries as just another commodity, like clothes, automobiles, pencils, books, diamond jewelry, and

so on. People are not considered to have a right to purchase any particular commodity, and no distinction is made in this respect between necessities and luxuries. Those who are rich can afford to purchase anything they want while the poor are often not able to procure even their basic needs. Under capitalist relations people have no right to an adequate diet, shelter, and medical attention. As with other commodities, people without what economists call “effective demand” cannot buy sufficient nutritious food. Of course, lack of “effective demand” in this case means that the poor don’t have enough money to buy the food they need.

Humans have a “biological demand” for food—we all need food, just as we need water and air, to continue to live. It is a systematic fact of capitalist society that many are excluded from fully meeting this biological need. It’s true that some wealthy countries, especially those in Europe, do help feed the poor, but the very way capitalism functions inherently creates a lower strata of society that frequently lacks the basics for human existence. In the United States there are a variety of government initiatives—such as food stamps and school lunch programs—aimed at feeding the poor. Yet, the funding for these programs does not come close to meeting the needs of the poor, and various charities fight an uphill battle trying to make up the difference.

In this era relatively few people actually die from starvation, aside from the severe hunger induced by wars and dislocations. Most instead become chronically malnourished and then are plagued by a variety of diseases that shorten their lives or make them more miserable. The scourge of malnutrition impedes children’s mental and physical development, harming them for the rest of their lives.

The Acute and Growing Crisis: The Great Hunger of 2008

At this moment in history there are, in addition to the “routine” hunger discussed above, two separate global food crises occurring simultaneously. The severe and acute crisis, about two years old, is becoming worse day by day and it is this one that we’ll discuss first. The severity of the current crisis cannot be overstated. It has rapidly increased the number of people around the globe that are malnourished. Although statistics of increased hunger during the past year are not yet available, it is clear that many will die prematurely or be harmed in other ways. As usual, it will be the young, the old, and the infirm that will suffer the worst effects of the Great Hunger of 2008. The rapid and simultaneous rise in the world prices for all the basic food crops—corn (maize), wheat, soybeans, rice, and cooking oils—along with many other crops is having a devastating effect on an increasing portion of humanity.

The increases in the world market prices over the past few years have been nothing short of astounding. The prices of the sixty agricultural commodities traded on the world market increased 37 percent last year and 14 percent in 2006 (*New York Times*, January 19, 2008). Corn prices began their rise in the early fall of 2006 and within months had soared by some 70 percent. Wheat and soybean prices also skyrocketed during this time and are now at record levels. The prices for cooking oils (mainly made from soybeans and oil palm)—an essential foodstuff in many poor countries—have rocketed up as well.

Rice prices have also risen over 100 percent in the last year (“High Rice Cost Creating Fears of Asia Unrest,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2008).

The reasons for these soaring food prices are fairly clear. First, there are a number of issues related directly or indirectly to the increase in petroleum prices. In the United States, Europe, and many other countries this has brought a new emphasis on growing crops that can be used for fuel—called biofuels (or agrofuels). Thus, producing corn to make ethanol or soybean and palm oil to make diesel fuel is in direct competition with the use of these crops for food. Last year over 20 percent of the entire corn crop in the United States was used to produce ethanol—a process that does not yield much additional energy over that which goes into producing it. (It is estimated that over the next decade about one-third of the U.S. corn crop will be devoted to ethanol production [Bloomberg, February 21, 2008].) Additionally, many of the inputs for large-scale commercial agricultural production are based on petroleum and natural gas—from building and running tractors and harvesting equipment to producing fertilizers and pesticides and drying crops for storage. The price of nitrogen fertilizer, the most commonly used fertilizer worldwide, is directly tied to the price of energy because it takes so much energy to produce.

A second cause of the increase in prices of corn and soybeans and soy cooking oil is that the increasing demand for meat among the middle class in Latin America and Asia, especially China. The use of maize and soy to feed cattle, pigs, and poultry has risen sharply to satisfy this demand. The world’s total meat supply was 71 million tons in 1961. In 2007, it was estimated to be 284 million tons. Per capita consumption has more than doubled over that period. In the developing world, it rose twice as fast, doubling in the last twenty years alone. (*New York Times*, January 27, 2008.) Feeding grain to more and more animals is putting growing pressure on grain stores. Feeding grain to produce meat is a very inefficient way of providing people with either calories or protein. It is especially wasteful for animals such as cows—with digestive systems that can derive energy from cellulose—because they can obtain all of their nutrition from pastures and will grow well without grain, although more slowly. Cows are not efficient converters of corn or soy to meat—to yield a pound of meat, cows require eight pounds of corn; pigs, five; and chickens, three (*Baron’s*, March 4, 2008).

A third reason for the big jump in world food prices is that a few key countries that were self-sufficient—that is, did not import foods, although plenty of people suffered from hunger—are now importing large quantities of food. As a farm analyst in New Delhi says “When countries like India start importing food, then the world prices zoom....If India and China are both turning into bigger importers, shifting from food self-sufficiency as recently we have seen in India, then the global prices are definitely going to rise still further, which will mean the era of cheaper food has now definitely gone away” (VOA News, February 21, 2008). Part of the reason for the pressure on rice prices is the loss of farmland to other uses such as various development projects—some 7 million acres in China and 700,000 acres in Vietnam. In addition, rice yields per acre in Asia have reached a plateau. There has been no per acre increase for ten years and yield increases are not expected in the near future (*Rice Today*, January–March 2008).

Some of the reasons for the recent price increases for wheat and rice are related to weather. The drought in Australia, a major wheat exporting country, and low yields in a few other exporters has greatly affected wheat prices. A 2007 cyclone in Bangladesh destroyed approximately 600 million dollars worth of its rice crop, leading to rice price increases of about 70 percent (*The Daily Star* [Bangladesh], February 11, 2008). The drought last year in northcentral China combined with the unusual cold and snow during the winter will probably lead the government to greater food purchases on the international markets, keeping the pressure on prices.

Speculation in the futures market and hoarding at the local level are certainly playing a part in this crisis situation to make food more expensive. As the U.S. financial crisis deepened and spread in the winter of 2008, speculators started putting more money into food and metals to take advantage of what is being called the “commodities super cycle.” (The dollar’s decline relative to other currencies stimulates “investment” in tangible commodities.) While it would be a mistake to see these aspects, however despicable and inhumane, as the cause of the crisis, they certainly add to the misery by taking advantage of tight markets. It is certainly possible that the commodity bubble will burst, bringing down food prices a bit. However, speculation and local hoarding will continue to put an upward pressure on food prices. Transnational corporations that process agricultural products, manufacture various foods, and sell food to the public are, of course, all doing exceptionally well. Corporate profits usually do well in a time of shortages and price increases.

Although not a cause for the increase in prices of other foods, the higher prices for ocean fish have created an added burden for the poor and near poor. Overfishing of many ocean species is removing this important protein source from the diet of a large percentage of the world’s population.

The response to the crisis has come in the form of demonstrations and riots as well as changes in government policies. Over the past few months there have been protests and riots over the increasing cost of food in many countries, including Pakistan, Guinea, Mauritania, Morocco, Mexico, Senegal, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. China has instituted price controls for basic foods and Russia has frozen the price of milk, bread, eggs, and cooking oil for six months. Egypt, India, and Vietnam have banned or placed strict control on the export of rice so that their own people will have sufficient food. Egypt, the world’s largest wheat importer, has expanded the number of people eligible to receive food aid by over 10 million. Many countries have lowered protectionist tariffs to try to lessen the blow of dramatically higher prices of imported foods. Countries heavily dependent on food imports such as the Philippines, the world’s largest importer of rice, are scrambling to make deals to obtain the needed imports. But these various stop-gap efforts have mainly marginal effects on the problem. Almost all people are forced into a lower standard of living as those in the middle class become increasingly careful about the foods they purchase, the near poor drop into poverty, and the formerly poor become truly destitute and suffer greatly. The effects have been felt around the world in all classes of society except the truly wealthy. As Josette Sheeran, the head of the UN’s World Food Program, said in February, “This is the new face of hunger....There is food

on shelves but people are priced out of the market. There is vulnerability in urban areas we have not seen before. There are food riots in countries where we have not seen them before” (*The Guardian*, Feb. 26, 2008).

Although Haiti has been a very poor country for years—80 percent of the people try to subsist on less than what two dollars a day can purchase in the United States—the recent situation has brought it to new depths of desperation. Two cups of rice, which cost thirty cents a year ago, now cost sixty cents. The description of an Associated Press article from earlier this year (January 29, 2008) is most poignant in its details:

It was lunchtime in one of Haiti’s worst slums, and Charlene Dumas was eating mud. With food prices rising, Haiti’s poorest can’t afford even a daily plate of rice, and some take desperate measures to fill their bellies. Charlene, 16 with a 1-month-old son, has come to rely on a traditional Haitian remedy for hunger pangs: cookies made of dried yellow dirt from the country’s central plateau.

The “cookies” also contain some vegetable shortening and salt. Toward the end of the article is the following:

Marie Noel, 40, sells the cookies in a market to provide for her seven children. Her family also eats them.

“I’m hoping one day I’ll have enough food to eat, so I can stop eating these,” she said. “I know it’s not good for me.”

Many countries in Africa and Asia have been severely impacted by the crisis with hunger spreading widely—but all nations are affected to one extent or another. In the United States—where over the past year the price of eggs increased 38 percent, milk by 30 percent, lettuce by 16 percent, and whole wheat bread by 12 percent—many people are starting to purchase less costly products. “Higher Food Prices Start to Pinch Consumers” is the way the *Wall Street Journal* put it in a headline (January 3, 2008).

It should be noted here that while wheat prices are at record levels and prices of wheat products in the United States will certainly go higher, the cost of the wheat in a loaf of bread is only small part of the retail price. When wheat prices double, as they have, the price of a loaf of bread may increase by 10 percent, perhaps from \$3 to \$3.30. However, the effect of a doubling of prices for corn, wheat, soybeans, and rice is devastating for poor people in the third world who primarily purchase raw commodities.

With food pantries and soup kitchens stretched to the breaking point, the U.S. poor are experiencing deepening suffering. In general, the poor in the United States tend to first pay their rent, heat, gas (for a car to get to work), and electricity bills. That leaves food as one of the few “flexible” items in their budgets. In the central part of my home state of Vermont, over the last year the use of food shelves (i.e., aid from local, charitable food assistance programs that give groceries directly to the needy) has increased 133 percent among all users and 180 percent among the working poor! (Hal Cohen, with the Central Vermont Community Action Council, personal communication February 20, 2008.)

The economic recession is beginning to be felt in many parts of the United States, adding to the rise in requests for help from the various government food assistance programs (“As Jobs Vanish and Prices Rise, Food Stamp Use Nears Record,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2008). But, frequently people using the inadequately funded government programs tend to run out of food toward the end of the month, resulting in a huge increase in demand at food shelves and soup kitchens at that time. And as the need for food has increased, food donations have actually declined—with a large drop in federal donations (with high prices there are fewer “surplus” commodities from farm programs, so \$58 million in food was given to food shelves last year versus \$242 million five years before).

Supermarkets have found ways to make money from damaged or dated goods they previously donated to charities. In Connecticut, there has been a surge in demand for food while supply is not keeping up. A food pantry in Stamford is supplying food to four hundred families, double the number of a year ago. According to the food pantry’s director, “I have had to turn people away....There were times I went home and wanted to cry” (*New York Times*, December 23, 2007). A professor at Cornell University who studies food-assistance programs in the United States has summarized the situation: “There is a nascent crisis building....Demand for food-bank assistance is climbing rapidly when the resources are falling in dramatic terms because the dollars just don’t go as far” (*Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2008).

The Long-Term Food Crisis

As critical as the short-term food crisis is—demanding immediate world notice as well as attention within every country—the long-term, structural crisis is even more important. The latter has existed for decades and contributes to, and is reinforced by, today’s acute food crisis. Indeed, it is this underlying structural crisis of agriculture and food in third world societies which constitutes the real reason that the immediate food crisis is so severe and so difficult to surmount within the system.

There has been a huge migration of people out of the countryside to the cities of the third world. They leave the countryside because they lack access to land. Often their land has been stolen as a result of the inroads of agribusiness, while they are also forced from the land by low prices they have historically received for their products and threats against campesino lives. They move to cities seeking a better life but what they find is a very hard existence—life in slums with extremely high unemployment and underemployment. Most will try to scrape by in the “informal” economy by buying things and then selling them in small quantities. Of the half of humanity that lives in cities (3 billion), some 1 billion, or one-third of city dwellers, live in slums. The chairman of a district in Lagos, Nigeria described it as follows: “We have a massive growth in population with a stagnant or shrinking economy. Picture this city ten, twenty years from now. This is not the urban poor—this is the new urban destitute.” A long *New Yorker* article on Lagos ended on a note of extreme pessimism: “The really disturbing thing about Lagos’ pickers and vendors is that their lives have essentially nothing to do with ours. They scavenge an

existence beyond the margins of macroeconomics. They are, in the harsh terms of globalization, superfluous” (November 13, 2006).

One of the major factors pushing this mass and continuing migration to the cities—in addition to being landless or forced off land—is the difficulty to make a living as a small farmer. This has been made especially difficult, as countries have implemented the “neoliberal” policies recommended or mandated by the IMF, the World Bank, and even some of the western NGOs working in the poor countries of the third world. The neoliberal ideology holds that the so-called free market should be allowed to work its magic. Through the benign sanctions of the “invisible hand,” it is said, the economy will function most efficiently and will be highly productive. But in order for the market to be “free” governments must stop interfering.

With regard to agriculture, governments should stop subsidizing farmers to purchase fertilizers, stop being involved in the storage and transportation of food, and just let farmers and food alone. This approach also holds that governments should stop subsidizing food for poor people and then the newly unbridled market will take care of it all. This mentality was evident as the Haitian food crisis started to develop late in 2007. According to the Haitian Minister of Commerce and Industry, “We cannot intervene and fix prices because we have to comply with free market regulations” (Reuters, December 9, 2007). This was the same response that colonial Britain adopted in response to the Irish potato famine as well as to the famines in India in the late 1800s. But to a certain extent this way of thinking is now internalized in the thinking of many leaders in the “independent” countries of the periphery.

This ideology, of course, has no basis in reality—the so-called free market is not necessarily efficient at all. It is also absolutely unable to act as a mechanism to end poverty and hunger. We should always keep in mind that this ideology represents the exact opposite of what the core capitalist countries have historically done and what they are actually doing today. For example, the U.S. national government has supported farmers in many ways for over a century. This has occurred through government programs for research and extension, taking land from Indians and giving it to farmers of European origin, subsidizing farmers directly through a variety of programs including low-cost loans, and stimulating the export of crops. It should also be noted that the United States, Europe, and Japan all developed their industrial economies under protectionist policies plus a variety of programs of direct assistance to industry.

The effects of the governments of the third world stopping their support of small farmers and consumers has meant that the life for the poor in those countries has become more difficult. As an independent report commissioned by World Bank put it: “In most reforming countries, the private sector did not step in to fill the vacuum when the public sector withdrew” (*New York Times*, October 15, 2007). For example, many African governments under pressure from the neoliberal economic policies promoted by the World Bank, the IMF, and the rich countries of the center of the system stopped subsidizing the use of fertilizers on crops. Although it is true that imported fertilizers are very expensive, African soils are generally of very low fertility and crop yields are low

when you use neither synthetic nor organic fertilizers. As yields fell after governments were no longer assisting the purchase of fertilizers and helping in other ways, more farmers found that they could not survive and migrated to the city slums. Jeffrey Sachs—a partially recovered free-trade shock doctor—has had some second thoughts. According to Sachs, “The whole thing was based on the idea that if you take away the government for the poorest of the poor that somehow these markets will solve the problems....But markets can’t step in and won’t step in when people have nothing. And if you take away help, you leave them to die” (*New York Times*, October 15, 2007).

Last year one country in Africa, Malawi, decided to reverse course and go against all the recommendations they had received. The government reintroduced subsidies for fertilizers and seeds. Farmers used more fertilizers, the yields increased, and the country’s food situation improved greatly (*New York Times*, December 2, 2007). In fact, they were able to export some food to Zimbabwe—although there are those in Malawi, who consider that to have lowered their own supplies too far.

Another problem occurs as capitalist farmers in some of the poor countries of the periphery enter into world markets. While subsistence farmers usually sell only a small portion of their crops, using most for family consumption, capitalist farmers are those that market all or a large portion of what they produce. They frequently expand production and take over the land of small farmers, with or without compensation, and use fewer people than previously to work a given piece of land because of mechanized production techniques. In Brazil, the “Soybean King” controls well over a quarter of a million acres (100,000 hectares) and uses huge tractors and harvesting equipment for working the land. In China corrupt village and city officials frequently sell “common land” to developers without adequate compensation to the farmers—sometimes there is no compensation at all.

Thus, the harsh conditions for farmers caused by a number of factors, made worse by the implementing of free-market ideology, have created a continuing stream of people leaving the countryside and going to live in cities that do not have jobs for them. And those now living in slums and without access to land to grow their own food are at the mercy of the world price for food.

One of the reasons for the growing consolidation of land holdings and forcing out of subsistence farmers is the penetration of multinational agricultural corporations into the countries of the periphery. From selling seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides to processing raw agricultural products to exporting or selling them through new, large supermarkets, agribusiness multinationals are having a devastating effect on small farmers. With the collapse of extension systems for helping farmers save seeds and with the disbanding of government seed companies the way was paved for multinational seed companies to make major inroads.

The giant transnational corporations such as Cargill and Monsanto now reach into most of the third world—selling seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and feeds while buying and processing raw agricultural products. In the process they assist larger farms to become

“more efficient” —to grow over larger land areas. The main advantage of genetically modified organism (GMO) seeds is that they help to simplify the process of farming and allow large acreages to be under the management of a single entity—a large farmer or corporation—squeezing out small farmers.

The negative effects of the penetration of large supermarket chains are being felt as well. As a 2004 headline in the *New York Times* put it “Supermarket Giants Crush Central American Farmers” (December 28, 2004). Large supermarkets would rather deal with a few farmers growing on a large scale than with many small farmers. And the opening of large supermarkets does away with the traditional markets used by small farmers.

The Prolonged Crisis Is Intensifying

It seems logical that with higher food prices, farmers should be better off and produce more to satisfy the “demand” indicated by the market. To a certain extent that is true—especially for farmers that can take advantage of all the physical and monetary advantages of large-scale production. Yet, the input costs for just about everything used in agricultural production have also increased, thus profit gains for farmers are not as large as might be expected. This is a particularly difficult problem for farmers raising animals fed on increasingly expensive grains.

In addition, things are not necessarily going well for small and subsistence farmers. Many are stuck in debt so deep that it’s hard for them to get back on their feet. An estimated 25,000 Indian farmers committed suicide last year because they could see no other way out of their predicament. (The Indian government has proposed a budget that includes loan waivers for small farmers that have borrowed through banks. However, if it actually goes into effect, the millions that have borrowed from local usurers will not benefit.) The consolidation of land holdings and the removal of small farmers and landless workers from the land has been exacerbated by the exceptional crop price increases over the last few years.

Rising crop prices cause the price of farmland to increase—especially of large fields that can be worked by large-scale machinery. This is happening in the United States and in certain countries of the periphery. For example, Global Ag Investments, a company based in Texas, owns and operates 34,000 acres of Brazilian farmland. At one of its farms, a single field of soybeans covers 1,600 acres—that’s two and a half square miles! A New Zealand company has purchased approximately 100,000 acres in Uruguay and has hired managers to operate dairy farms established on their land.

Private equity firms are purchasing farmland in the United States (Associated Press, May 7, 2007) as well as abroad. A U.S. company is cooperating with Brazilian and Japanese partners to purchase 385 square miles in Brazil, approximately a quarter of a million acres! This is also happening with South American capital taking the lead—a Brazilian investment fund, Investimento em Participacao, is buying a minority stake in an Argentine soybean producer that owns close to 400,000 acres in Uruguay and Argentina.

Rising crop prices have also led to an acceleration of deforestation in the Amazon basin—1,250 square miles (about the size of Rhode Island) in the last five months of 2007—as capitalist farmers hunger for more land (BBC, January 24, 2008). In addition, huge areas of farmland have been taken for development—some of dubious use, such as building suburban style housing and golf courses for the wealthy.

In China during 2000 to 2005, there was an average *annual* loss of 2.6 million acres as farmland is used for development. The country is fast approaching the self-defined minimum amount of arable farmland that it should have—approximately 290 million acres (120 million hectares)—and the amount of farmland will most likely continue to fall. As part of an effort to gain access to foreign agricultural production, a Chinese company has made an agreement to lease close to 2.5 million acres of land in the Philippines to grow rice, corn, and sugar—setting off a huge protest in the Philippines that has temporarily stalled the project (Bloomberg, February 21, 2008). As one farmer put it: “The [Philippine] government and the Chinese call it a partnership, but it only means the Chinese will be our landlords and we will be the slaves.”

Ending World Hunger

Ending world hunger is conceptually quite simple. However, actually putting it into practice is far from simple. First, the access to a healthy and varied diet needs to be recognized for the basic human right that it clearly is. Governments must commit to ending hunger among their people and they must take forceful action to carry out this commitment. In many countries, even at this time, there is sufficient food produced to feed the entire population at a high level of nutrition. This is, of course, most evident in the United States, where so much food is produced. It is nothing less than a crime that so many of the poor in the United States are hungry, malnourished, or don't know where their next meal will come from (which itself takes a psychological toll) when there is actually plenty of food.

In the short run, the emergency situation of increasingly severe hunger and malnutrition needs be addressed with all resources at a country's disposal. Although mass bulk distribution of grains or powdered milk can play a role, countries might consider the Venezuelan innovation of setting up feeding houses in all poor neighborhoods. When the people believe that the government is really trying to help them, and they are empowered to find or assist in a solution to their own problems, a burst of enthusiasm and volunteerism results. For example, although the food in Venezuela's feeding program is supplied by the government, the meals for poor children, the elderly, and the infirm are prepared in, and distributed from, peoples' homes using considerable amounts of volunteer labor. In addition, Venezuela has developed a network of stores that sell basic foodstuffs at significant discounts over prices charged in private markets.

Brazil started a program in 2003 that is aimed at alleviating the conditions of the poorest people. Approximately one-quarter of Brazil's population receive direct payments from the national government under the *Bolsa Familia* (Family Fund) antipoverty program. Under this program a family with a per capita daily income below approximately \$2 per

person per day receives a benefit of up to \$53 per month per person (*The Economist*, February 7, 2008). This infusion of cash is dependent on the family's children attending school and participating in the national vaccination program. This program is certainly having a positive effect on peoples' lives and nutrition. It is, however, a system that does not have the same effect as Venezuela's programs, which mobilize people to work together for their own and their community's benefit.

Urban gardens have been used successfully in Cuba as well as other countries to supply city dwellers with food as well as sources of income. These should be strongly promoted—with creative use of available space in urban settings.

Agriculture must become one of the top priorities for the third world. Even the World Bank is beginning to stress the importance of governments assisting agriculture in their countries. As Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, managing director of the World Bank, has stated,

Today the attention of the world's policy makers is focused on the sub-prime woes, and the financial crises. But the real crisis is that of hunger and malnutrition...this is the real problem that should grab the world's attention. We know that 75 percent of the world's poor people are rural and most of them depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Agriculture is today, more than ever, a fundamental instrument for fighting hunger, malnutrition, and for supporting sustainable development and poverty reduction. (All-Africa Global Media, February 19, 2008)

Almost every country in the world has the soil, water, and climate resources to grow enough food so that all their people can eat a healthy diet. In addition, the knowledge and crop varieties already exist in most countries so that if farmers are given adequate assistance they will be able to grow reasonably high yields of crops.

Although enhanced agricultural production is essential, much of the emphasis in the past has been on production of export crops. While this may help a country's balance of payments, export oriented agriculture does not ensure sufficient food for everyone nor does it promote a healthy rural environment. In addition to basic commodities such as soybeans, export-oriented agriculture also leads naturally to the production of high-value luxury crops demanded by export markets (luxuries from the standpoint of the basic food needs of a poor third world country), rather than the low-value subsistence crops needed to meet the needs of the domestic population. Production of sufficient amounts of the right kinds of food within each country's borders—by small farmers working in cooperatives or on their own and using sustainable techniques—is the best way to achieve the goal of "food security." In this way the population may be insulated, at least partially, from the price fluctuations on the world market. This, of course, also means not taking land out of food production to produce crops for the biofuel markets.

One of the ways to do this and at the same time help with the problem of so many people crowded into urban slums—the people most susceptible to food price increases—is to provide land through meaningful agrarian reforms. But land itself is not enough. Beginning or returning farmers need technical and financial support in order to produce

food. Additionally, social support systems, such as cooperatives and community councils, need to be developed to help promote camaraderie and to solidify the new communities that are developed. Perhaps each community needs to be “seeded” with a sprinkling of devoted activists. Also, housing, electricity, water, and wastewater need to be available to make it attractive for people living in the cities to move to the countryside. Another way to encourage people to move to the country to become farmers is to appeal to patriotism and instill the idea that they are real pioneers, establishing a new food system to help their countries gain food self-sufficiency, i.e., independence from transnational agribusiness corporations and provision of healthy food for all the nation’s people. These pioneering farmers need to be viewed by themselves, the rest of the society, and their government as critical to the future of their countries and the well-being of the population. They must be treated with the great respect that they deserve.

Conclusion

Food is a human right and governments have a responsibility to see that their people are well fed. In addition, there are known ways to end hunger—including emergency measures to combat the current critical situation, urban gardens, agrarian reforms that include a whole support system for farmers, and sustainable agriculture techniques that enhance the environment. The present availability of food to people reflects very unequal economic and political power relationships within and between countries. A sustainable and secure food system requires a different and much more equitable relationship among people. The more the poor and farmers themselves are included in all aspects of the effort to gain food security, and the more they are energized in the process, the greater will be the chance of attaining lasting food security. As President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, a country that has done so much to deal with poverty and hunger, has put it,

Yes, it is important to end poverty, to end misery, but the most important thing is to offer power to the poor so that they can fight for themselves.