
The hungry won't live if farms die

Posted by Zia - 2008/05/23 04:49

Biofuels, global warming, commodity derivatives, energy prices, prosperity in China and India... the plate seems full when it comes to nailing the culprits for the raging global food crisis.

But as food riots break out from Egypt to Haiti to Bangladesh and over 100 million people across the globe stand on the brink of being hurled deeper into poverty and hunger, there is one possible ingredient to the emerging human tragedy that we appear far less inclined to discuss - industrial agriculture. And the reason why it has not had as much bad press as eco activists would like is that industrial agriculture is widely seen as having kept our bowls full and cheap for long. Now that the bowl is running dry, it's time to look deeper into its pros and cons, as any long-term solution to the food crisis will essentially depend on either reinforcing industrial farming or reversing the process altogether.

"Green Revolution", or the introduction of modern farming techniques, formed the bedrock of rapid economic growth, food security and poverty reduction in many Asian countries including China. Higher agricultural productivity has not only helped millions climb out of poverty and provided cheap and abundant food, it has also freed up farm labor to propel industrial progress. For a country like China, tasked with the responsibility of feeding a fifth of the world's population with less than a 10th of the world's farmland, the appeal of industrial agriculture is thus obvious.

But times of crises require us to look beyond the obvious. Last month's report of an intergovernmental initiative backed by the World Bank and the UN, the result of three years' work by over 400 scientists, called for an overhaul of the practice of chemical-intensive agriculture to tackle hunger. The malaise, as the report put it, is that small-scale farmers, rural communities and the environment are being bled dry to attain higher and unsustainable farm yields. The prescription, which was considered by over 60 countries including China, is more natural fertilizers, small-scale farming and agroecological methods.

These conclusions echo the views of green groups waging war against large-scale monoculture farming and its accessories. These groups argue that hunger is primarily caused by poverty, not lack of food per se, and modern agriculture pushes farmers into poverty by pushing them out of their farms. Even those who stay put finally succumb to the high costs of synthetic inputs such as seeds, pesticides and fertilizers.

This initial cost push can be sustained in the early stages of industrial farming when the yields are high, but becomes progressively untenable as soil is said to lose its fertility over time because of the chemical overdose. India, where indebtedness is estimated to have driven more than 150,000 farmers to their deaths between 1997 and 2005 after the huge initial success of the "Green Revolution", is cited as a classic example.

Industrial agriculture is also heavily energy-dependent both in terms of the composition of fertilizers and pesticides, and the necessity for fuel in mechanized farming, marketing and distribution. Which means if cheap oil is history, so is cheap food. China has just increased this year's rural budget by \$3.6 billion, mainly to provide direct subsidies to farmers, while India has announced a \$15 billion write-off of farmers' debt. All nations seeking to ensure food security will have to pump in similarly copious amounts of cash to sustain farming, greatly straining their coffers.

Which poses the all-important central question: what cost industrial agriculture? But then, how else will the world ensure food sufficiency for a rising population? Food majors posit genetically modified crops as the answer. Eco groups counter that GM crops are just more of the same.

The need of the hour is to determine the truth. If salvation indeed lies in industrial farming, we'll have to intensify the process. If not, we'll have to make a clean break and seek fresh solutions like organic farming. With arable land shrinking, water tables falling and one child dying every five seconds from hunger-related causes, we'd better be quick.

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