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A Bleak Report on the Global Food System

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Written by John Berthelsen

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The world faces unprecedented strains on food production by the middle of the century

The global food system faces almost insurmountable problems in feeding what will probably be more than 9 billion people by 2050, with competition for land, water and energy intensifying at a time when climate change and land degradation will play an ominous role, according to a new report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The 221-page report, titled *Foresight. The Future of Food and Farming* and written by the Government Office for Science in the United Kingdom. Released on Jan. 25 and produced by about 400 leading experts and stakeholders from about 35 low-, middle and high-income countries across the world, it makes for bleak reading.



Already, despite the fact that birth rates are falling dramatically in many parts of the world, there appears little chance that they will fall enough to have a real effect on the numbers of people on the planet in the next four decades, and it is likely that an increasing number of them will be hungry, and that the Millennium Development Goals set for 2015 are highly unlikely to be met. Already 925 million people – 13.2 percent of the population – experience hunger today, with another billion people malnourished. Together, they account for 27.5 percent of the global population. At the same time, as Asia Sentinel [reported on Sept.23, 2009](#), another billion people are substantially overconsuming, leaving themselves open to Type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

While these nearly 2 billion people are either malnourished or starving, the entry into the middle class of hundreds of millions of people in India, China and other newly prospering countries means they are increasingly likely to add proteins such as grain-fed meat to their diet. These food items require considerably more resources to produce than others. Different studies have predicted that per capita consumption of meat⁴ will rise from 32 kilograms today to 52 kg by the middle of the century.

"Much of the responsibility for these three billion people having suboptimal diets lies within the global food system," the report states. "Many systems of food production are unsustainable. Without change, the global food system will continue to degrade the environment and compromise the world's capacity to produce food in the future, as well as contributing to climate change and the destruction of biodiversity."

Although the report carefully treads away from assigning blame for the situation, a long series of bad decisions as well as unwillingness to make hard choices by the world's governments goes to tell why the food system is endangered.

The continuing refusal of major states like the United States – which is not alone -- to deal with the problem of climate change is a major issue. The lack of will by both rich and poor nations to address The Doha Development Round of World Trade Organization talks, now nearly 10 years in negotiations, is a major issue, allowing the rich nations to hide behind agricultural subsidies to keep out foodstuffs from emerging ones. It also allows developing nations to hide behind tariff walls to keep cheap foodstuffs from major producers from the United States, Russia and others from reaching the poor.

The report points to widespread problems with soil loss due to erosion, loss of soil fertility, salination and other forms of degradation as an overburdened world loses land to population degradation. Rates of water extraction for irrigation, draining underground aquifers, are exceeding rates of replenishment in many places; over-fishing is a widespread concern.

Industrialized farming like that practiced in the United States relies heavily on fossil fuel-derived energy for synthesis of nitrogen fertilizers and pesticides. In addition, food production systems frequently emit significant quantities of greenhouse gases and release other pollutants that accumulate in the environment.

"In view of the current failings in the food system and the considerable challenges ahead, this Report argues for decisive action that needs to take place now," the authors write, saying that the response of the current actors "will affect the quality of life of everyone now living, and will have major repercussions for future generations."

The world's policymakers must consider the global food system "from production to place," the authors note. The

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In terms of both nutrition and providing livelihoods, especially for the poor – about a billion people rely on fish as their main source of animal protein. Many vulnerable communities obtain a significant amount of food from the wild ("wild foods"), which increases resilience to food shocks. However, long-line fishing trawlers, which can drop nets for miles, are rapidly depleting the global fishery, making it problematical how long the seas can sustain the global population. The report argues for vastly increased aquaculture.

"On the production side, competition for land, water and energy will intensify, while the effects of climate change will become increasingly apparent. The need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to a changing climate will become imperative." While the United States is the biggest greenhouse gas producer, the voters returned a US House of Representatives to office made up of a majority who think climate change is some sort of scientific plot, and there is all but no chance they will act.

"Over this period globalization will continue, exposing the food system to novel economic and political pressures," the report states, any one of which presents substantial challenges to food security," the authors note. "Together they constitute a major threat that requires a strategic reappraisal of how the world is fed."

The five key challenges are to balance future demand and supply sustainably – to ensure that food supplies are affordable; ensure that there is adequate stability in food supplies – and protecting the most vulnerable from the volatility that does occur; achieving global access to food and ending hunger and recognizing that "that producing enough food in the world so that everyone can *potentially* be fed is not the same thing as ensuring food security for all"; managing the contribution of the food system to the mitigation of climate change; and maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services while feeding the world."

"Without change, the global food system will continue to degrade the environment and compromise the world's capacity to produce food in the future," the authors write.

The authors endorse new technologies such as genetic modification of living organisms, cloning of livestock and nanotechnology, which is opposed by a major segment of the population, especially in Europe. But, the authors say, such scientific approaches "should not be excluded *a priori* on ethical or moral grounds, though there is a need to respect the views of people who take a contrary view."

There have been some substantial breakthroughs, including what is hoped to be another green revolution in rice production pioneered by the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Beijing and the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines. Called "Green Super Rice," it is the result of a project begun in 1998, involving the painstaking crossbreeding of more than 250 different potential varieties and rice hybrids, which is expected to allow for the cultivation of rice in dry areas where rice has never grown before. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation presented the program with a US\$18 million, three-year grant to expand the benefits to Asia and Africa.

The authors call for interconnected policy-making, in which all areas of the food system should consider the implications for volatility, sustainability, climate change and hunger and that policy in other sectors outside the food system including energy, water supply, land use, the sea, ecosystem services and biodiversity must be considered.

"Achieving much closer coordination with all of these wider areas is a major challenge for policy-makers."

The sad fact is, however, that given local political exigencies, the current state of the industrial food system in the United States and Europe, the failure to agree on freeing up trade in agricultural products, the lack of agreement over climate change and a host of other issues make it highly unlikely that the world's governments can pull together to agree on economic development and global sustainability. It wouldn't be wise for the world to get its hopes up. But the world's policymakers would do well to read this report.

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John Berthelsen



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