



June 5, 2008

My Turn: Population key to global food crisis

By David B. Grundy

In an Associated Press article that appeared April 23 titled "Food program warns of hunger crisis," author David Stringer claims the World Food Program says 20 million of the poorest children around the world are threatened with the "first global food crisis since World War II."

"A 'silent tsunami' of hunger is sweeping the world's most desperate nations, said Josette Sheeran, the WFP's executive director," the article reads.

Many examples are given of this condition: "The price of rice has more than doubled in the last five weeks, she said. The World Bank estimates food prices have risen 83 percent in just three years," the article continues.

Various reasons are offered for this rapid rise: rising fuel prices, unpredictable weather, rising demand for food from India and China, the increase in demand for meat and dairy products in these two countries.

Various solutions to the food shortage were suggested. Obviously, grow more food. Plant genetically modified crops that can withstand drought or that produce more nutrients.

And yet, in the entire article, there was no mention of attacking the main driver of hunger: too many people. It seems to me policymakers are missing the point if they believe producing more food will solve the problem of hunger when the increase in population outstrips the increase in food production.

About 40 years ago, many were extolling the benefits of the green revolution. Using intensive agricultural practices, the world could end hunger as it was then known. In placing too many hopes on this revolution, two points were missed which are coming home to haunt us in 2008:

The increased production of food relied very heavily on the use of fossil fuel and manufactured artificial fertilizers, and

Even though more food was produced, it did not keep up with the raging increase in world population.

Voluntarily limiting population size is a very touchy subject. Some of the world's religions won't even listen to arguments in favor of stabilizing our population. Our own administration prohibits financial aid to any organization that promotes family planning through contraception. To me, this is short sighted. 25,000 people around the world die each day of starvation and poverty, according to the World Food Programme of the United Nations. How are we serving humanity by allowing unfettered population growth only to watch a number of people equal to that of central Vermont die each day from starvation?

Too often we think of this as someone else's problem. But it will come home to us as we see less and less variety and quantity of food available to us on the super market shelves. As the price of oil continues to rise, those strawberries from South America in February will be too

expensive for even the richest of us to buy. We will find that we will be consuming food that is grown closer to home. A recent study done by a college student has suggested Vermont could grow enough food to feed all of our residents. But you can guess that will not include exotic fruits and vegetables or large quantities of meat and dairy products.

I believe it is past time for our policy makers to stop pandering to conservative religionists and face up to the fact that our world only has enough crop land and fresh water to provide for a population that is very likely less than we now try to support.

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