

## The Food System We Need

Over the past few years, much effort has gone into forecasting future global food demand (by [FAO](#), [Foresight](#), [IFPRI](#), [Agrimonde](#) etc). One of the common features of most of these studies is that their crystal gazing focuses on the amount and types of food that people will wish to buy and be able to pay for on the market rather than on needs. FAO's first estimate for 2050 claimed that, while population would rise from about 7 billion to just over 9 billion (i.e. by around 30%), food demand would grow by 70%, and that there would still be around 300 million people living in chronic hunger! In a follow up publication, FAO's revised forecast put incremental food demand in 2050 at 60%.

Underlying these forecasts is the assumption that, as incomes rise, especially in developing countries, people would make a nutritional transition that would emulate the current food consumption – and wastage – patterns of higher income consumers, especially those in “northern” countries. The forecasts confirm that if we rely on economic growth and the market alone, those who could not afford to make the nutritional transition would remain hungry.

There is, of course, nothing inevitable about these forecasts. For me, they say that it now is high time to start taking actions that would result in very different but much better outcomes by 2050. The idea that people living in industrialised countries should continue to over-consume and waste food, as we are now doing, and that everybody else in the world, once they can afford to, should adopt similar diets is horrific, given the huge negative health, environmental and climate change outcomes that this would imply. That hundreds of millions of people should still be consigned to live in permanent hunger while almost everyone else has access to more food than they need for a healthy life is nothing short of an abomination.

I believe that we should be aspiring for a situation in 2050 – and, ideally, well before then – in which all people on earth eat healthily, achieving a fully adequate, balanced but not excessive level of nutrition. If we attain this outcome, not only will everyone be better nourished and healthier than they are now, but we shall also have reduced the potential stresses placed on the world's natural resources, slowed the processes of climate change, and hopefully improved the well-being of people who produce, distribute, process and sell our food (for sustainability must be considered from both social and environmental perspectives). I would suggest that achieving this aspiration will be good for the global economy and also contribute to a more peaceful world.

I don't know much about making forecasts, but I believe that if we can cut back heavily on the food losses, waste and overconsumption, especially of meats, as well as in the growth in food-based biofuel output that is implicit in most of the current forecasts, it should be possible to reduce incremental food requirements in 2050 to around 50% above current

levels, or perhaps even less. Any further slowing of population growth would help, but much of the forecast expansion in total population by 2050 is due to longer life expectancy. Overall, however, it should be possible for everyone to eat well with a growth in food production in the coming years that is substantially lower than envisaged by most forecasters, and so make the very necessary shift to more sustainable food production technologies much easier.

The various institutions involved in assuring global food security should focus more attention on what has to be done now, especially through policy adjustment, to arrive at a better future outcome. If you look at current food management policies, there is clearly lots of room for improvement. For instance the massive farm subsidy programmes run by some industrialised countries make food cheap for high and middle income consumers, encouraging over-consumption and waste, while at the same time placing downward pressures on the prices for food products grown by farmers, especially in developing countries, who don't benefit from similar subsidies cutting the incentive for them to expand their output.

From a moral perspective, the highest priority must be given to ending hunger and other debilitating forms of malnutrition as quickly as possible. The generally held view that this will require a huge growth in food production is totally unfounded, as I found to my surprise when I calculated how much food would be needed to lift a billion hungry people just above the hunger threshold. With an average food deficit per hungry person of 250 to 300 kcal per day, equivalent to about 70 gm of wheat or rice, the annual need would be roughly 30 million tons per year or less than 2 % of world cereal production! Even if this is doubled or tripled to enable the hungry to consume a still better diet, the amount needed is small relative to the total world food supply. Until countries take steps to run their economies more equitably, the main instruments for reducing hunger must be nationwide social protection programmes that assure that the poorest families can buy (or produce) their food needs through providing them with regular cash transfers or food stamps until, as a result of better diets, they can stand on their own feet.

The second set of activities relates to cutting out food waste and over-consumption, and particularly to guide the "nutritional transition" towards healthy diets. This cannot be left to market forces alone, but will involve nutritional and behaviour change education, restraints on advertising and codes of behaviour for entities involved in food selling, as well of taxation on "unhealthy" and high "foodprint" foods.

The third area of focus must be on assuring people involved in the food chain, but especially small scale farmers, that they can make a decent living from producing and handling food. Here the main requirement is that consumers should pay a fair price for food that enables farmers and other rural people to earn competitive incomes without having to migrate from their homes in search of better livelihoods. Consumer prices, partly as a result of added taxes, should also cover the costs of environmental damage associated with producing food and getting it to the table, including the cost of investments in essential rural infrastructure and services as well as of additional publicly funded research aimed at developing truly sustainable food systems.

Of course, as food prices rise, the social protection budget and the number of beneficiaries must also rise. But this will be a lot more affordable than continuing a system in which all food consumption and waste, by both poor and rich, is effectively subsidised and induces absurd consumer behaviour.

Essentially what I am suggesting is that we cannot afford to continue to let food management take care of itself. We need to look particularly at food price, subsidy and taxation policies to ensure that they send the right signals to both consumers and producers. But, while doing this, it is vital to increasingly protect the food consumption of the poorest families to enable them to step upwards out of hunger.

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