

The Food Issue

The global food system can seem a complicated thing. It involves farmers, buyers, speculators, governments and many others, all affected by weather, politics and other factors.



An easy way to understand it is to think of it as a water bucket. For most of the last half of the 20th century, the bucket had two holes. One hole was labeled human food, the other one was labeled animal feed. During that time, the water in the bucket leaked out steadily, but it never emptied -- each year the world's farmers added enough water to keep it filled. Most years they added so much that it actually overflowed.

For about 50 years, the system worked fine. But then the holes started getting larger -- especially the animal-feed hole, as people around the world began to eat more meat. It became harder for farmers to keep the bucket filled.

Then a third hole was drilled in the bucket -- biofuels, or food for our cars. At first, it was small. Today, it is very large. Now water is really

gushing from the bucket.

Throw in changing weather patterns -- things like drought or, as happened this year on the Canadian Prairies, too much rain -- and production can't keep up with demand. The result? Global food shortages and rapidly rising food prices and famine, such as we are seeing in Eastern Africa, where people are suffering from drought and high food prices are limiting the attempts to help them.

It wasn't always this way. Since the Second World War, farmers have kept the world well-stocked with food. Rapid mechanization, improved seeds and petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides helped them keep up with demand. In fact, many years the bucket was filled with too much food -- the challenge facing western governments was what to do with all the surplus crops.

Today, that's all changed. Food surpluses are a thing of the past. This is a very good thing for Canadian farmers -- as prices rise, they can finally make a decent living. But high food prices, particularly when they change dramatically and quickly, are causing havoc in developing countries.

So what changed? For one thing, there are simply more people on the planet. But that's not the main cause for concern. A bigger challenge is the dramatic growth in the use of grains for animal feed for meat. It's partly due to consumption at home -- Canadians today eat more meat than they used to. But the real pressure comes from the developing world, where rapidly rising incomes are driving exponential growth in demand for meat. Today the amount of cereals used to feed animals is rapidly approaching that of total human food, and the rise of soy-bean use for that purpose is even more dramatic.

Another big factor is bio-fuels. Today, corn used for bio-fuels makes up almost 40 per cent of the total corn crop in the U.S. -- equal to the total amount of corn traded on the entire international market.

All of this consumption is putting a strain on food production and driving up prices. The question is whether production can keep up -- and what happens when it doesn't?

Globally, farmers simply can't keep up with demand for food for people, animals and bio-fuels. Less-than-reliable weather patterns are exacerbating the situation.

As a result, global food stocks, which have traditionally provided a shock absorber when production fell, are declining. Or, to stay with the bucket analogy, the world's farmers continue to add water although the amount is less predictable, but the outflow is so large they can't keep it full, much less produce surpluses. And without that shock absorber, food prices around the world are becoming more volatile and prone to sudden increases.

Read more at: <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/westview/rebalancing-the-global-food-supply-126053248.html> excerpted from Rebalancing the Global Food Supply by Stuart Clark July 23, 2011

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Posted: 07/23/2011

OSJ

Social Justice News for Redeemer CRC Members

JULY 2011

Food production that can't always keep up with demand, rapidly rising prices that negatively affect poor people, disappearing surpluses -- all things that are part of the new reality facing the world today. We need to think hard about **how we are going to adapt to it.**

Food waste is a significant global challenge – but how food is wasted depends largely on context.

One third of all food produced is wasted, says a recent report from The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Food is lost at every stage, from initial production, through the supply chain, the retail stage, and finally at the household level.

Since grain prices play only a minor role in our grocery bills, and our grocery bills themselves only take an average of 10 to 15 per cent of our income, the rapidly emptying bucket doesn't affect the average Canadian. In developing countries, however, where food bills make up as much as 75 per cent of total household income, this is a much more serious problem. When prices suddenly double, as they have in recent years, the impact is immediate: Families eat less, and eat less well -- something that hits children particularly hard, since they no longer receive the foods that are vital for their growth.

Developing Countries	630 million tonnes wasted	Lost in agricultural production, mostly due to substantial post-harvest losses caused by inadequate storage facilities and poor marketing and distribution channels.
Medium Income Countries & High Income Countries	220 million tonnes wasted = total net food produced in Sub Saharan Africa.	Lost at the household level
Canada	approximately 40 % of food produced is wasted along the food chain.	More than 50 % of this waste is through consumer behavior – food thrown away in Canadian homes.

From the standpoint of small-scale farmers in developing countries, a simple but strong investment in infrastructure to store and transport food would minimize losses, which world would have an immediate impact on food security, since many small-scale farmers live on the margins of food insecurity.

In high income-countries food wastage must be curbed through changes in consumer behavior.

Reducing food wastage is a step towards everyone in the world having enough to eat.

According to the FAO report, people in high income countries waste food because, financially, they can afford to; perhaps in terms of environmental costs, they cannot.

Wasting food also means wasting resources used in food production. This means that enormous amounts of resources used in food production are exploited in vain, including the greenhouse gas emissions caused by producing food that is wasted. In a world with limited resources (land, water, energy), and a growing population, cost-effective solutions must be set up to produce enough safe and nourishing food for all. Reducing food losses is a place to start.

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Articles in this newsletter excerpted from "The Advocate" a paper and portal serving Christian Reformed social activists by the Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action of the CRC: www.crcjustice.org and **Kairos Times**, a monthly e-newsletter of KAIROS, the social justice organisation of eleven Canadian churches and church agencies. www.kairoscanada.org and of Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ)'s monthly newsletter **OLA** <http://cpj.ca/index.html> and the **Mobile Justice Newsletter** of the Committee for Contact with the Government (CCG) http://www.crcna.org/pages/ccg_mobilejustice.cfm

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