



GROUP OF FIFTEEN

Food Insecurity in the Developing World

By Jason Burke

Introduction

From large cities to rural villages, many people in the developing world are forced to deal with a lack of food to eat or an inability to pay for it. Many of the world's poor find themselves facing the harsh reality of hunger and **malnutrition** on a nearly daily basis. Particularly affected are more vulnerable groups like children and the elderly. Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), a non-governmental organization providing medical care to areas in need, has reported on the rampant malnutrition among children in Nigeria, which is one of the countries in the G15. In their briefing, Médecins sans Frontières writes about extreme malnourishment in Nigeria caused by the chronic shortages of food. They quote one Nigerian mother of six in 2006 as saying that "It's hard to get three meals a day...But we have no money, so now we just have one, sometimes two." With parents forced to cut back on feeding their children, many fall victim to the plight of extreme malnutrition, which can lead to disease and sometimes even death.

With such dire possibilities, it is no wonder that the United Nations (UN) has made the first of its eight **Millennium Development Goals** the eradication of "extreme poverty and hunger." The UN has set a goal to "reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger" by 2015. The calories in food, which are considered an annoyance to many health-conscious people in developed countries, represent the very energy that people in the developing world depend on to be able to work. Without adequate nutrition, people in the developing world aren't able to work as much, costing them valuable income. Moreover, poor nutrition leads to a weakened immune system, which exposes people to a whole variety of diseases which further degrade productivity.

The situation, however, has degraded even further since the Nigerian mother was interviewed in 2006. Over the last few years, a deteriorating global economy has led to one of the worst global food shortages in recent history. With the prices of even the most basic foodstuffs like wheat and milk reaching record highs and wages not rising at **commensurate** rates, food has now become even more out of reach for many in the developing world. These factors have combined to create what many are calling an **acute** global food crisis. This crisis has especially powerful—and negative—implications for the developing world. Nations that are trying feverishly to spur development need food the most—yet, at this point, they are the countries that can least afford food.

Malnutrition—*faulty nutrition due to inadequate or unbalanced intake of nutrients.*

Millennium Development Goals—*eight goals agreed upon by the international community to accomplish by 2015, including fighting hunger, disease, and gender inequality.*

Commensurate—*equal in measure or extent.*

Acute—*sharp or severe.*

To continue forward with a development agenda in the face of the crisis, the members of the Group of 15 will need to take aggressive measures to control the spiraling food crisis.

Explanation of the Problem

Lack of Food as a Barrier to Development

As the Group of 15 is a **consortium** of developing nations, it is clear that none of their national economies are particularly strong. Yet, it is also pertinent to note that the economies of the participating nations are not **homogenous** in nature. Though all nations involved are technically “developing,” some nations are far more “developed” than are others. Member states range from Zimbabwe, which is not only one of the poorest nations in the world based on per capita GDP, but which also has severe **hyperinflation** and an astronomically high unemployment rate. On the other end of the spectrum, there are countries like Chile, which have relatively high per capita GDPs and relatively low inflation and unemployment in comparison to the other nations that comprise the developing world. There is significant variability within the G15 countries, with the African economies being much weaker than the South American and Asian members. Food prices don’t only affect productivity and health, but can also lead to individuals having to devote more income to food that could be spent on domestically produced consumer goods, further contributing to economic stagnation.

A Blow to Developing Nations: The Current Global Food Crisis

Food is a **constraint** on the economic development of the countries comprising the G15. Therefore, the global food crisis that has been unfolding since 2006 is bad news for developing nations. Many of the most basic food products on which the poorest people in the world subsist have more than doubled in price. Since the beginning of 2006, the price of soybeans has risen 107%. Maize and wheat experienced even more dramatic price shifts, with the price of maize rising 125% and the price of wheat rising 136%. The most serious spike in prices was seen in the price for rice, which saw a price increase of 217%. The factors that precipitated this crisis are not entirely understood; however, it has been hypothesized that four of the most major factors are ethanol subsidies, rising oil prices, agricultural subsidies, and the growing demand for meat. Food prices that were already **taxing** for the poorest people in these developing nations have shot up consistently since 2006 to levels that are unreachable to some—thus creating a crisis with both economic and humanitarian dimensions.

Corn Ethanol

One factor repeatedly cited as a possible cause of the global

Consortium—*a n agreement, combina- tion, or group (as of companies) formed to undertake an enterprise beyond the resources of any one member .*

Homogenous—*similar in composition, struc- ture, characteristics, or nature.*

Hyperinflation—*an extreme rise in inflation over a short period of time.*

Constraint—*a limiting factor; boundary.*

Taxing—*involving, imposing, or constitut- ing a burden.*

spike in food prices is the growing popularity of **ethanol** as an energy source. Many of the poorest people in the world's developing nations subsist largely on simple foods made from basic crops like wheat and corn. With great amounts of attention recently placed on the importance of getting away from fossil fuels and transitioning world economies to newer, cleaner, and more renewable sources of energy, ethanol has gotten rather popular. Ethanol is a type of alcohol that contains great amounts of chemical energy. As it can be used in internal combustion engines, ethanol has been viewed by many as a promising alternative to gasoline. Yet great amounts of corn are now being diverted from food to fuel. In the year 2007, 100 million tons of corn were **routed** into the production of biofuels like ethanol. That is a substantial portion (five percent) of the 2 billion tons of corn produced around the world last year. As the demand for corn goes up, so does the price, which means that the world's newfound affinity for corn ethanol is showing up in its prices. This price increase has reached people in developing nations, who are now paying much larger amounts of money for corn and corn products.

Ethanol—an organic product that can be used as fuel; can be made from a variety of organic materials, like sugar and corn..

Route—to divert in a specified direction.

Oil Prices

Yet another major suspect behind the global food price spike is the rising cost of crude oil. Oil is necessary to nearly every step of food production. At the most basic level, the machines used in developed nations to plant and harvest crops use oil to operate. Then, crops like wheat and corn must be processed, and many of the machines used to process these crops are also dependent on oil. After the foodstuffs are ready to sell, they must be transported to markets that are, in many cases, spread across the globe, of course relying on gasoline and jet fuel to get them there. Even in less obvious ways, oil **permeates** agriculture. Petroleum is necessary to the manufacture of fertilizer, so with a rise in the price of oil, the prices of fertilizers also began to rise, bringing with them the price of food. Overall, the rising price of oil has affected the price of food in many different ways, partially causing the large price spike. Crude oil has dropped dramatically in recent weeks in response to a strong dip in demand as the global economy worsens; however, this drop in price will take some time to show up in food prices and may also prove to be temporary.

Permeate—to diffuse through or penetrate something.

Agricultural Subsidies

The third major issue that is contributing to the crisis in the developing world is large agricultural subsidies in the developed world. In recent years, the amount of aid to farmers in the United States under the new American farm bill has increased by nearly 80 percent. Moreover, in Europe, the Common Agricultural Policy, which subsidizes European farming, has been extended through 2013. Overall, in developed na-

tions, aid to farmers has reached into the hundreds of billions of dollars. These subsidies allow farmers in developed nations to sell their products at much lower prices than they would be able to otherwise, putting them at a significant advantage against farmers in developing countries that cannot afford to hand out such **lavish** subsidies. This means developing nations are left to import food that they themselves could be producing because it is cheaper to do so. Though this does have the obvious benefit of providing people in developing countries with even cheaper food than they could produce themselves, this is dangerous because it leaves developing countries especially susceptible to shocks in the food market; a severe weather event in Iowa could dramatically affect the food supply of people in Nigeria. More importantly, by suppressing domestic food production, agricultural subsidies in developed nations eliminate thousands of potential jobs in developing nations. Further, as the amount of food produced levels off while the demand for food rises every higher due to population growth, the price for agricultural products rises and people in the developing world are priced out of the market for food, potentially triggering a state of crisis.

Lavish—marked by profusion or excess.

Consumer Behavior in Asia

A fourth factor that receives much less attention but likely has the largest implication is the shift in consumption patterns in China and India. These nations, which comprise over one third of the world population, have experienced dramatic improvements in their standard of living in recent years, and consequentially their populations are eating more overall, but especially more meat. This is especially pronounced in India, where vegetarianism is in on the decline. This is important because it requires several pounds of grain to produce a single pound of meat; meat is simply not the most efficient use of agricultural resources. For example, one pound of steak requires almost three pounds of soy or grain for production in developed nations. Most importantly, however, it means that every pound of meat demanded means several fewer pounds of grain supplied. In fact, almost 20% of US cropland is dedicated solely to feeding its livestock. These numbers can be misleading – less than half a pound of grain is used to produce a pound of meat in most developing countries – but the fact remains that in the world's wealthiest nations, a large portion of grain production ends up in cattle or cars and that China and India's growing demand for meat has greatly affected food prices.

While there are several other secondary factors that many have speculated are contributing in some way to the rise in global food prices, the four aforementioned factors are the primary causes of the rise in food prices.

Recent Developments

Instability Rocks the Developing World

In the developed world, a 217% spike in the price of rice is only an inconvenience for most people. In the developing nations that comprise the G15, such a large spike in such a short period of time is a humanitarian crisis. These high food prices force developing nations to divert precious resources away from more ambitious development initiatives into paying for food. Ultimately, many countries with limited resources simply cannot feed all of their citizens. Around the world, markets in many countries have simply been **devoid** of some of the most basic food products, causing people to do anything possible to survive, including robbery. The situation has created massive unrest that fosters rowdy protests and violent riots that further destabilizes these countries. Such violent events have shaken countries from Haiti to Pakistan to Cameroon, including some members of the G15.

Devoid—*being without a usual, typical, or expected attribute or accompaniment.*

Riots in Africa

In Senegal, public protests against the skyrocketing price of food began late in 2007 and continued sporadically. The largest protest, however, took place in the Senegalese capital of Dakar on March 30, 2008. In that city, the national consumers' union had organized demonstrations to protest the rising prices of rice, oil, and soap. The police force, however, responded in an extremely heavy-handed manner, using tear gas and batons to force the protesters from the streets. Reports of the use of electric prods to subdue protesters were also widespread. The resulting tension caused a great debate between human rights groups in Africa and Senegalese forces. This particular case was among the most extreme witnessed in G-15 countries. But citizens' discontent with rising food prices within Group of 15 nations is certainly not limited to Senegal. Low incomes and expensive food in Egypt cause violence on a near-daily basis. In that nation, in which 45 percent of the population is forced to make ends meet on under \$2.00 per day, the government subsidizes the cost of bread; however, with a limited supply of bread and a high demand for it, vendors are forced to watch angry would-be buyers throw fists at each other. This near-daily violence is just another side effect of increasingly prohibitive food prices. Further, in Zimbabwe, the situation in some smaller villages has gotten so desperate that people are abandoning meat and using melons as the main source of nutrition. As inflation in Zimbabwe approaches an astronomical 11,000%, food prices have risen to levels that were previously unimaginable. The government of Zimbabwe has done its nation yet another disservice by setting prices for food products. As the prices set by the government of Zimbabwe are below the real value of the food, many producers simply can't afford to grow food because they can't recoup their costs, leaving people to

search through piles of rubbish looking for any food that is salvageable. While the situation in Kenya is not so dire, the onslaught of a fungus that has destroyed vast amounts of rice in Kenya is certainly a source of concern. As Kenya imports rice even in good harvest years, the nation will have to import even more this year. With rice prices at record highs, the prospect of an impending food shortage is daunting.

Protests in South America and Asia

In the G15's Asian nations, rising food prices have also created public disorder. Most notably, in January 2008, an estimated group of 10,000 people took to the streets of Indonesia's capital city of Jakarta to protest **precipitous** increases in the price of soybeans—a staple crop for that nation. At that point, global soybean prices had risen to an all-time high price per bushel. For Indonesia, which imports about two-thirds of its soybeans, such a drastic price increase was too much. The government was forced to divert resources into controlling food costs and its development agenda was disrupted. Rising food costs in Sri Lanka have some children's **advocates** concerned that basic needs like healthcare and education will be neglected simply so that the poorest people in the nation do not have to face death by starvation.

The extreme instability caused by rising food prices has also been echoed across the Group of 15 member states in South America. In Peru, a group of women gathered in the capital city of Lima on April 30, 2008, to protest rising food costs. Banging empty pots and shouting slogans against the current political administration, the women decried the exorbitant cost of wheat. The shortage of wheat caused by high prices has even forced the military of Peru to start making bread with flour made from potatoes, which are more readily accessible. Similar policies to those implemented in Zimbabwe have led to **sporadic** food shortages in Venezuela, as well.

Although inflation is much lower in Venezuela than it is in Zimbabwe, the 18.7% inflation rate is still significantly higher than that of many other G15 nations. Venezuela's socialist government has avidly pursued price caps on various food products—caps that they claim protect the poor. However, in a sad reality similar to that of Zimbabwe, the artificially low prices have forced many food producers out of business, creating a lack of food for all Venezuelans. Particularly scarce in Venezuela are meats and sugar. Food shortages also became **exacerbated** in March 2008 when the president of Argentina levied high export taxes on food products produced inside of the country in an attempt to keep them from being exported so that they could be consumed domestically. Enraged over the drastic cut in their incomes, farmers embarked on a strike that lasted for weeks as the president refused to relent. As meats began to disappear from store shelves in Buenos Aires, tens of thousands of Argentines protested.

Precipitous—to be dangerously steep.

Advocate—one that supports or promotes the interests of another.

Sporadic—occurring occasionally, singly, or in irregular or random instances.

Exacerbate—to make more violent, bitter, or severe.

The problem of skyrocketing food costs is clearly affecting different Group of 15 member states in different ways. However, all developing nations are clearly feeling the pinch of higher prices. From Africa to Asia to South America, the countries that desperately need to be pumping every available dollar into economic development in order to increase standards of living are now being forced to divert precious resources to one of the most basic human needs—food.

Focus of the Debate

The Group of 15 does not have a specific procedure to combat the growing food problems within the individual countries. However, collective actions within smaller subsets of G-15 member states appear to already be happening. For example, in April 2008 India had a summit with African G-15 nations and one of the issues discussed was food security. The members of the G-15 seem to be taking three general steps that are moving towards helping out with the food crisis. First, the member states seem to be pursuing a policy of **trade liberalization** with each other, though this free trade sentiment has not been fully realized. Second, Brazil and Venezuela began to collaborate on the monitoring of food stockpiles in March 2008 to try to make sure that neither country experienced a significant food shortage. Third, Venezuela and Argentina are helping each other out by trading food for oil. Venezuela has typically experienced food shortages while Argentina has typically experienced energy shortfalls. Venezuela is one of the biggest producers of oil in the world and Argentina has massive food surpluses. Therefore, these nations are utilizing their comparative advantages to try to prevent food shortages.

At the **crux** of the debate is how best to ensure that developing nations are not only able to feed their citizens, but that they can ensure a steady enough supply of food to enable further development. The methods described above are some of the more popularly proposed solutions.

NGO Perspectives

Greenpeace

A **non-profit** advocating for the environment, Greenpeace would be most concerned with making sure that any plan for agricultural expansion was done in the best interest of the environment. Of course, they would not oppose agriculture at the cost of people starving; however, Greenpeace would advocate for sustainable agriculture, and is very concerned with environmentally irresponsible expansion of agriculture, which both destroys natural landscapes and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Further, one of their biggest campaigns is a campaign against genetically modified crops. Greenpeace would strongly advise

Trade liberalization—*the process of eliminating barriers to trade like tariffs and subsidies.*

Crux—*a vital, basic, decisive, or pivotal point.*

Non-profit—*an organization that is not run for a profit, but typically for charitable or social reasons.*

against the use of **genetically modified** crops in an attempt to increase crop yields.

Oxfam International

Oxfam International is a non-profit concerned with the **eradication** of poverty around the world. The current food crisis is one of the issues with which Oxfam International is the most concerned. As such, they have created a list of six suggestions to reduce this problem. These six points, directly quoted, are included below:

- National governments should act now to reduce food insecurity.
- Donors, international institutions, and national governments must invest in agriculture, including support for small-scale farmers.
- National governments must put the creation of decent work opportunities in rural areas at the center of their policy to support waged agricultural workers.
- Governments should recognize the key role played by women producers and workers and pay special attention their needs. Investing in their livelihoods will help to reduce poverty and increase productivity, as well as promote gender justice.
- Allow space for national trade policies to manage rural development.
- Support the organizations of the rural poor, including women who are farmers and agricultural laborers.

Red Cross

One of the major functions of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is to provide necessary support in times of large-scale emergencies. As Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies would be very likely to provide support in times of vast food shortage, the organization would likely support any and all efforts to alleviate the current food shortage and prevent future food shortages to happen. The Red Cross believes that food prices could very well lead to a humanitarian crisis, and that something must be done to **avert** such a situation.

Genetically modified—*having been genetically altered through artificial gene manipulation.*

Eradication—*to do away with completely.*

Avert—*to see coming and ward off.*

Possible Solutions

Agricultural Free Trade

Many of the different countries within the Group of 15 cannot produce enough food to support their growing populations. Some nations with climates particularly **inhospitable** to the growth of food have to import great amounts of food. Historically, in times of normal food prices, this importation of food has not caused great hardship to these nations. Yet, when food prices spike to record levels—as they have in

Inhospitable—*providing no shelter or sustenance.*

the past few years—these food importing nations have had to shoulder an increasingly high financial burden just to feed their citizenry. For example, nations like Egypt are constantly importing food at high cost to themselves. Indeed, even some nations that produce a great deal of food do not always produce the right kind of food to feed their populations. Some nations may produce a great deal of wheat or soy, but do not produce great amounts of meat and thus must import it. This too is an expensive proposition.

Yet, within the Group of 15, there are member states that are both net importers and net exporters of food products. That is to say that some nations import more food than they export, whereas other nations in the Group of 15 export more food than they import. Therefore, it may be advantageous for the member states of the Group of 15 to negotiate a free trade zone for agricultural products. This would allow farmers in a food exporting nation to seek the most competitive prices for their goods on the market of the developing world and would result in lower food prices for those developing nations who must buy their food products in the global food market. Other **commodities** could be traded in this free trade scheme, as well. Venezuela and Argentina exchanging oil for food is one good example of how relaxed trade restrictions between two nations can actually work to each nation's advantage and allow food to get to where it really needs to be.

Commodity—*an economic good; a good that can be traded.*

Shared Stockpiles

Many nations have their own stockpiles of food, which get them through tough times like those currently being experienced by many developing nations. Maintaining one's own food stockpiles, however, can be a costly endeavor. One idea that two Group of 15 nations have tried in order to reduce costs is to share stockpiles. This has worked fairly well in ensuring food stability in Brazil and Venezuela. It is possible that regional food stockpiles can be set up to share the costs of creating these large but necessary resources. One regional stockpile may be set up for the Latin American members of the Group of 15 with others being set up for African and Asian member states.

Pressure Nations to Reduce Agricultural Subsidies

One major factor that G15 nations cannot directly address but can pressure industrialized societies to adjust are the industrialized world's system of agricultural subsidies. These subsidies give Western farmers a large advantage over those in developing countries as far as production prices. For example, even though it may cost less money to produce a bushel of wheat in Africa than it does in Iowa, heavy subsidies mean that the American product is often actually cheaper for consumers to purchase. This artificially **distorts** food markets and means that developing nations have difficulty competing in agricultural mar-

Distort—*to twist out of a natural, normal, or original shape or condition.*

kets. This means that they can't build self-sustaining agriculture and that thousands of potential agricultural jobs are eliminated. Ethanol subsidies are a particularly **egregious** example of such a market distortion, depending on your point of view. G15 nations can attempt to pressure industrialized nations to remove these subsidies. Though the short-term effects would be profound and largely negative for all involved as farmers in the developed world lose income and consumers in the developing world lose developed nations' crops, in the long-term, all parties benefit from a truly free market.

Egregious—*to be conspicuously bad.*

Questions for Policymakers

One of the most basic questions that needs to be addressed by any successful resolution is how to feed the most vulnerable people in the Group of 15 nations. Currently, many nations cannot produce sufficient amounts of food to sustain their own populations while other nations produce more than enough food and are eager to send their products overseas. Yet free trade and the lowering or elimination of import and export tariffs is and always has been a sensitive subject. One question that must be addressed in any resolution coming out of the Group of 15 is just how much power the G15 has. In the past, the schemes put out by the Group have been relatively weak and non-binding. How far do you want to take the powers of this Group? Unanimously agreeing on a free trade agreement is certainly not outside of the realm of possibility for the Group of 15, but it would represent a huge evolution in the powers of the group. Are you willing to take this step? If not, how will you address the dire problems of food shortage in these nations?

Conclusion

The tragedy caused by the world food price crisis has manifested itself in the economies of the developing nations of the world – including those of the G15 nations. With most free financial resources going into feeding their populations, these struggling nations have scant resources to devote to development. This food price crisis is, therefore, truly a human and an economic crisis that demands serious and immediate attention and innovation.

Guide to Further Research

Much of the literature about the current global food crisis is not yet in academic literature. Therefore, for the most recent data on the global food crisis as it develops, following some of the large newspapers of the world will be helpful for further research. In particular, "The Washington Post" had a very comprehensive section on the global food

crisis. Other newspapers like BBC and The New York Times are pretty comprehensive in their coverage of these topics, as well.

To write a good resolution, it will also be rather important to understand the economic underpinnings of free trade and the ideas that will go along with creating a free trade zone. In this pursuit of knowledge, it will be important to find a general economics textbook that is easy to understand. Furthermore, many economic journals may be particularly helpful in understanding contemporary debates surrounding free trade.

In your research, you will want to familiarize yourself with your nation's trade policies and past interactions with the G15. Solutions that work for Chile will very likely need to be **tailored** extensively to work in a country like Zimbabwe. Make sure to know enough about the member nations of the G15 to be able to craft solutions that are flexible enough to work for everyone.

Tailored—*custom-made to fit something or someone specifically.*

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