Many years ago Joan Amatrading sang, ‘there’s enough food to feed the world’. That still applies right now. In fact, globally, we are producing more food than the population needs, by subsidising overproduction in the West. And yet approximately 850 million people around the world do not have enough to eat every day.

Alongside this all-pervading poverty, overweight is fast becoming the norm in most developed countries and obesity is a serious health problem worldwide. Last year in the British Medical Journal, Micky Chopra and Ian Darnton-Hill suggested that a global strategy is needed on food as well as on tobacco, reducing the demand for food. However, Liselotte Schäfer Elinder, writing in the British Medical Journal, more recently suggests that it is the oversupply of food that needs to be tackled. And this is driven by agricultural subsidies in Europe and the US.

Many people have already suggested that overproduction of food followed by excess consumption is the main reason for increased body mass in the USA and elsewhere. Global per capita dietary energy supplies are apparently rising and expected to continue to grow for the next couple of decades. With decreasing global population growth, combined with strong growth in agricultural productivity, more and higher-quality food is available, at the lowest prices in history. This should be positive news for the estimated 850 million people around the world who suffer from hunger and malnutrition. But these people continue to lack access to food for a number of reasons. Along with conflicts and disasters, unfair international trade combined with a lack of political will to eradicate it, it is probably one of the greatest reasons for this continued hunger. This overproduction of food by developed countries has serious implications for the health of those in poorer countries. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) says that rural development and agriculture are key to reducing poverty and hunger and reaching the millennium development goals. But while rich countries continue to apply export subsidies on their own products and impose tariffs on imported food, the agriculture sectors of these poorer countries are unlikely to grow.

There are huge resources put into agriculture in developed countries. In 2003, the total transfers to agriculture in countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development were $350 billion. Eliminating these kinds of economic policy distortions could produce global welfare gains of up to $165 billion according to the FAO. As Liselotte Schäfer Elinder points out, the global cost of not eradicating hunger – the costs of conflict, recurrent emergencies, international crime and premature death – is enormous. There is also an environmental cost to all this surplus agriculture that must be taken into consideration.

She also goes on to say that the estimated costs for food for the 850 million who are hungry is $10.4 billion a year and the annual cost of ensuring sound nutrition and health in developing countries is another $80 billion, over and above the $136 billion currently spent. An estimated $135 billion is needed in 2006 for achieving the millennium goals, rising to $195 billion in 2015 – contrast this with the $350 billion spent needlessly every year in agricultural subsidies in one group of Western countries alone.

There is a very negative view held by many wealthy people that the poor simply want handouts. My personal experience is different. People want the opportunity to work and, on a larger scale, countries want the opportunity to trade. Yes, we can point to corruption and nepotism in most African countries as one of the main reasons for their poverty, but this is not something that is unique to Africa as Enron and Parmalat have shown us. What is unique to Africa and to other developing countries is that any kind of poverty relief, aid or otherwise, comes with many strings attached and the greatest of these is the demand that these countries open up their markets to the West. Lack of food is one of the most pressing problems across Africa. People do grow their own, but the imperatives of the global economy have led to changes in crops that are not always beneficial to those growing them and they are paid prices for their goods that are such that a cappuccino in London costs more than the coffee grower in Africa is paid for the beans to produce it. This appalling inequality has got to stop, both on a global and a local level. The toll in poor health, frank disease and economic destruction is too high, morally, ethically and practically.


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