

A Malthusian nightmare

A global food scarcity, coupled with skyrocketing prices, stares us in the face. As more and more land is diverted for non-cereal cultivation and industrial units, and farmers are deprived of water, the situation can only get worse

Claude Arpi

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We all receive unsolicited e-mail, especially from 'good friends' who wish us well. Invariably one has to forward this kind of mail to a number of other 'friends' within a fixed time frame, thus generating some great karma for oneself. These email usually immediately go into my wastebasket.

However, recently, an attached PowerPoint presentation did not get the usual fate. The title, 'Global Warming', intrigued me.

The slide-show was a frightful dialogue between a father and a son, staged in year 2070. The planet was cracked and dry; human beings had no water, leave alone to bathe; they had no food other than tablets. The oldest human being on earth was 50, though he looked 90.

The father was explaining to his son how the planet was when he was in his teens, with forests, lakes, glaciers... and a lot of food to eat. I stopped watching; it was unbearable.

A few days later, a hot debate was triggered by the remarks of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She affirmed that the improvement in the diets of people in India and China and the consequent imports of foodstuff by these two countries were among the causes of the present global food crisis.

All Indian political parties cried foul. Who was she to speak in such a way?

Oil was added to the fire when US President George W Bush, during an interactive session on economy in Missouri, argued: "Just as an interesting thought for you, there are 350 million people in India who are classified as middle class. That's bigger than America. Their middle class is larger than our entire population." He concluded: "And when you start getting wealth, you start demanding better nutrition and better food, and so demand is high, and that causes the price to go up."

No doubt, Mr Bush and his Secretary of State were the wrong persons to point a finger at India. According to the data of the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation, the consumption of cereals - wheat, rice, maize, corn, etc - has been faster in the US than in India and China.

While the consumption of cereals by India is projected to have grown to 197.3 million tonnes in 2007-08 (2.17 per cent increase from 200607), that in China has risen to 389.1 million tonnes (1.8 per cent extra). During the same period, the consumption of cereals in the US is said to have increased by 11.81 per cent to 310.4 million tonnes. A large part of the rise is due to the production of biofuels. Probably with a guilty consciousness, Mr Bush was trying to justify the fact that the US utilised some 30 million tonnes of corn to produce biofuel.

That China and India getting wealthier will create a food shortage is not a new thought and has nothing to do with political beliefs. In 1995, the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, DC, published a book, Who Will Feed China? This remarkable study was written by one of the world's foremost agricultural experts, Mr Lester Brown. At the time, it forced the Chinese leaders to rethink their agricultural strategies. However, it was completely ignored in India - both by the 'experts' and the media.

The theory advanced by Mr Brown was that with the growth in population in China and the escalation of industrial development, not only would the needs of the Chinese increase exponentially, but also arable land would shrink rapidly. As a result, China would have to import more grain from the world market. The predicted consequence was a substantial rise in the world prices of cereals.

In a traumatic scenario, Mr Brown foresaw that Earth would not be able to produce enough grain for the world demand. The poorer countries, unable to produce or buy their food, would be the first to suffer. The recent riots in several African and Asian countries are only a harbinger of what could happen on a larger scale in one or two decades (much sooner than 2070!).

In October 1996, the Beijing Review had to admit that Mr Brown's predictions had begun to materialise.

China's total coverage of cultivated land dropped by an astounding 21 million hectares between 1958 and 1995, while that country's population grew significantly from 660 million to 1.2 billion during the same period.

Today, everyone admits that a yearly increase of 100 million human beings collides with what our planet can provide to its inhabitants.

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The problems of China and India have larger dimensions. When a problem affects 2.3 billion people, consequences are obviously drastically different to what affects a smaller country.

Mr Brown had calculated that if the entire Chinese population would drink two extra bottles of beer per person, the entire annual grain production of Norway would be necessary to produce this additional beer.

Already in 1995, the conversion of agricultural land into other uses - factories, residential areas, airports, roads, flyovers, etc - had led to the loss of 52 per cent of Japan's grain harvested areas, 46 per cent of Korea's and 42 per cent of Taiwan's.

Though it started later, China's (and India's) development is not different from these three countries.

Unfortunately, the food crisis cannot be reduced to the rapid development of Asian tigers or elephants. It is far more complex.

With crude oil prices rising to over \$ 120 a barrel and perhaps soon reaching \$ 150, the US thought to use biofuel as an alternative. Data collated by FAO shows that corn to produce biofuel increased two-and-a-half times between 2000 and 2006 in the US. In 2007, the world production of biofuels increased by 20 per cent to 54 billion litres (jumping to 1.5 per cent of the global supply of liquid fuels from 0.25 per cent the previous year.) The US mainly produces ethanol from corn, while the second producer, Brazil, primarily uses sugarcane. The two account for 95 per cent of the world's ethanol production. The US boosted its output by 33 per cent to 24.5 billion litres in 2007.

But that is not all. As arable land shrinks, the middle class eats better and farmers are encouraged to abandon cereals to cultivate more 'profitable' crops. This is not only true in the US or Brazil for biofuels, but also in India. Successive Agriculture Ministers have encouraged farmers to 'diversify' into floriculture or horticulture.

Just last week, Union Agriculture and Food Minister Sharad Pawar bemoaned the slow pace of development of the fruit and vegetable business. He complained that despite huge production strength, India had only 1.4 per cent of the total global market. He stated that in the past few years, diversification had led to horticultural production rising to 185.2 tonnes from 19.3 million hectare area.

This is fine. The farmers should get more revenue from their land, but the fact remains that land earlier used for cereals is being diverted to other crops, forcing India to import cereals.

Directly and closely linked with food production is the problem of water. Here the situation is even gloomier. Without mentioning the criminal policy of providing free electricity to farmers, the coming up of huge cities has forced authorities to get water from farther sources.

This is usually done by diverting rivers to the cities, with the consequence that large regions become dry and unfit for agriculture. The vicious cycle continues. The Yellow River in China is a typical case today: The downstream areas are dry more than 250 days a year.

Is there a solution? At the pace we are moving today, unmindful of consequences, the scenario painted in the dreadful PowerPoint presentation could occur in a decade or two. For the time being, of course, cricket is more important.



Nothing grows here anymore: As cities guzzle water, farms go dry

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