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MCC Peace Essay

When Food is Better than a Mustang

Trade is arguably the greatest invention in human history. It enables us to get whatever we want, as long as we have something of enough value to trade. We can get iPods, Mustangs, bed sheets, toothpaste, or any commodity that we desire. The only catch is that we need to have money. Poor people, particularly in developing countries, have very little money to begin with. They cannot afford the newest televisions or fancy cars, and probably would not need them anyway. They can only afford the greatest necessity of life: food. When prices rise, they are the ones who suffer most. To us wealthy Americans, food seems to be just another thing that we must pay more for today than we did several years ago, but we still are able to eat all we want. When prices rise, the poor must simply do without. With millions of people going hungry, it is urgent to solve this food crisis. If global leaders and common citizens are willing to work together to address this problem, a solution may not be so hard to find.

Our world is capable of producing enough food for everyone, and it already does. There are over six billion people on this planet, but every one of us could eat 2700 Calories per day (FAO). This is enough. Not only would it satisfy our voracious American tastes, but it would also save twenty-five thousand people every day, twenty-five thousand people who die of hunger. However, more than 800 million people, approximately one-eighth of the world population, are still chronically hungry (Burgermeister). We, as Americans, worry about how milk costs four dollars instead of two dollars, but we still are able to buy it to feed our families. Families in developing countries do not have that option. They spend approximately 80% of

their income on food, compared to our meager 20%. If prices rise, they must get by with less.

The prices of food commodities have nearly doubled in the past three years (De Schutter). Since there is enough food on this planet for everyone, we must be sure that every person, regardless of income, can get what he or she needs. To give hungry people food, we must combat rising prices.

Prices frequently spike because of localized shortages. Often, this is because of conflict or an influx of refugees fleeing from conflict. This threatens local food supply and prices rise. A greater factor, however, is weather. Global warming is causing a dramatic increase of destructive weather. Droughts and floods are causing crop failures worldwide, such as the two-year wheat failure in Australia. Because Australia is the world's fourth largest exporter of wheat, their shortage meant the world supply of wheat was threatened. When there was a shortage of wheat, all grain prices increased. Since grains are used interchangeably, a shortage of wheat translates to a general shortage of food. Localized crop failures may seem insignificant globally, but in the world economy, everything matters. Our food supply is shaky enough that it matters.

In addition to conflict and crop failure, increased consumption threatens our food supply. Countries that have recently seen an economic boom, such as China, also see an emerging middle class. This middle class eats middle class food, instead of simple grains, vegetables, and an occasional bit of meat. Per capita, meat consumption in China was around 20 kg per year in 1980. Now it is at about 80 kg per year. It takes 4.5 plant calories to make one calorie of milk or eggs, and a stunning 9 calories to make one calorie of meat (De Schutter). Since meat uses so many of the world's available plant calories, supply is threatened again and prices continue to

rise. Meat is not the only problem, however; eating highly processed foods has a similar effect because so much energy goes into processing. Going back to the basics by eating more unprocessed grains, fruits, and vegetables would lower food prices as well as improving our health.

Increased consumption cannot just be blamed on humans becoming more carnivorous. Cars consume a great deal of available calories. Biofuels were touted as a weapon against global warming, but they are causing such a blow to food markets that they may not be worth the hype. Ethanol, for example, is dramatically influencing food prices. In the last three years, ethanol production has been booming. In the same time, corn prices have more than doubled, from \$2.12 per bushel to \$4.28 per bushel (“World Bank Chief”). We cannot just stop ethanol production; it is already such an important part of the economy in the Midwest and makes up about one third of United States fuel supply. The answer may lie in the next generation of biofuels. In Brazil, for example, sugarcane is yielding twice as much ethanol per acre than corn does. Using algae is even better. One acre of algae could theoretically create sixteen times more fuel per acre than corn (Bourne). It would take more research and government support, but there are far more efficient sources of fuel than corn. If we make the transition right, we can improve the food situation without halting a large portion of the agricultural economy or jeopardizing our fuel supply. In addition, our environment could be improved and perhaps global warming can be slowed, improving yields and preventing some crop failure.

Cheaper and more efficient fuels would also dramatically lower the costs that most immediately affect the price of food: production and transportation costs. The high price of oil makes fertilizing, planting, spraying, and harvesting far more expensive. Any industry that sees

higher production costs will create a more expensive product. Therefore, the finished product, food, is also far more expensive. When the food is transported across the country, or even across the world, it is likely far more expensive than locally grown food would be. Yet most of the food that we consume has been transported much farther than would be efficient. Instead of eating bananas from Costa Rica and grapes from Chile, we could choose locally grown apples or peaches. It would not in itself make a tremendous difference on the future of the world, but solving the global food crisis will take small steps such as these.

Economically, a great deal of this has to do with policy. Paradoxically, people do not want to buy locally grown food because it is more expensive. Locally grown foods use fewer resources from farm to table than foods that must be transported across the globe, but they grow on a smaller scale and must be sold at higher prices. This is true in the United States, where locally grown vegetables will often be more expensive than imported ones. It is also true in developing countries, where subsidized food from the United States may be cheaper than locally grown food. If local farmers were to sell their products for the same low prices, they would not be able to sustain themselves. According to the World Bank's development report, United States subsidies cost developing countries \$17 billion (Lavelle). These subsidies must be reduced to provide local farmers the chance to compete with large corporations.

A short-term solution is aid. Aid programs often involve shipping our food surpluses overseas, which is inefficient. Jennifer Parmelee, spokesperson for the World Food Programme, says that cash "enables us to purchase closer to the area in which we want to deliver the food, which means it will be at a lower price, it will cost less to transport it, and it will get there faster." Giving cash to aid programs like these would ultimately decrease the cost of giving

people food. Additionally, it could stimulate local economy, therefore making it easier for people to access food in the future.

Even if global policy was aligned to evenly distribute food to everyone, our global food supply is far too easily threatened. With over six billion people on the planet, a number that is projected to increase to eight billion in the next fifteen years, we need a more stable food supply. We do not have an endless supply of arable land. When it is threatened by global warming, many people go hungry. Currently, sub-Saharan Africa is the hardest hit. Because of increasing arid areas, yields are projected to decrease by fifty percent in the next twenty years (De Schutter). If global warming continues unchecked, much of our arable land will no longer be usable. We must combat global warming to ensure that future generations have enough food.

On the land that we do have, we must get the highest yields possible while conserving the soil for future generations. Better agricultural techniques, such as no-till, would reduce soil erosion by nearly one hundred percent, keeping soil fertile (Huggins). Better crops would help increase yields. Over the last thirty years, conventional crop breeding has accounted for a fifty percent yield growth in developing countries. Genetically modified crops could help even more. This technology could potentially have unanticipated negative effects, but it is worth investigating when our planet is in a state of crisis.

The responsibility for this food crisis lies on no single person, corporation, or country. There is no one to blame for the millions of hungry people in the world. Perhaps, then, we can only blame ourselves. Every person in this world contributes to the problem, whether directly or indirectly, whether by making poor political decisions or by eating one too many steaks. To

solve this crisis will take a great deal more than better policy or a better environment. It will take the commitment of every person on this planet.

The first step is to raise awareness. Most people do not even know that there is a food crisis. They know that there are hungry people in the world, but they do not realize the magnitude of the problem. Only by learning that there is a problem can we begin to fix it. The second step is to change bad policy. As ordinary Americans, we think that we cannot do much to change the political situation. Perhaps we are not all leaders of a country, but we are in a democratic nation where every opinion counts. If public awareness rises, our leaders will be pressured to do something about the problem. America is one of the most powerful nations in the world, so if we begin to change, perhaps the rest of the world can change as well. With cooperation between the leaders in the world, solutions may be nearer than we think. The third step, and perhaps the hardest, is to stabilize our food supply. When the world population is growing so rapidly and our food supply is so easily threatened, it will take drastic steps to make sure that future generations can have enough food.

Jesus healed the sick, welcomed the outcast, and fed the hungry, and he called us to follow his example. With an exploding population and threatened environment, this food crisis is likely the greatest the planet has ever faced. However, we have more tools to combat hunger than ever before. We can make use of the new technologies to increase yields, improve nutrition, and combat climate change. Globalization means that we can unify our efforts. With these resources, we can follow Jesus. We can be sure that every human being on the planet has the chance to live and to live well. We do not need to make sure everyone can have an iPod or a Mustang. We need to make sure they can have the most important commodity of all: food.

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