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## **Food Crisis**

With World Food Day October 16, the disappointing global situation continues to indicate an obvious, if at times inconvenient, solution: sharing what we have.

By Giulio Meazzini

The price of bread and milk at our local grocery store is sky high, but this is not just local: the whole world is dramatically affected, and the poorest countries are suffering the most. More and more people realize the world is starving. A Food and Agriculture Organization conference in Rome on world food security sadly proved that our leaders cannot put aside individual differences to coordinate a worldwide effort to feed the hungry.

How did we get to this point? Isn't this the third millennium? What are the United Nations and the FAO doing? We knew about hunger, but mostly in relation to a group of chronically starving African countries. This is hitting us at home. Families in our communities can't make ends meet. Elderly folks who were doing well are now caught digging in trash cans behind stores and markets.

In Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, starving crowds riot around aid convoys. Communities with large immigrant populations feel growing rage at their perceived inability to accommodate those seeking a better life.

### **Where Did We Go Wrong?**

When it comes to identifying the root of the problem, experts are divided. Some point their fingers at the rising price of gas and shrinking food crops. The biggest international producers of corn, wheat and rice—governments and corporations alike—have realized that their crops will yield more cash if converted to biofuel, and this is the route that many of them have been taking for some time.

Others see climate change as the main culprit, and there is no doubt that a serious drought is affecting the whole planet. But climate change has become too easy and convenient a scapegoat for all kinds of disasters.

Still others point out the reduction in food aid after food reserves diminished and the purchasing power of some large developing countries increased—particularly the emerging middle classes in India and China.

Then there are worries about overpopulation. Even though we do in fact have the resources to feed everyone, we haven't yet established a system through which food can be distributed effectively. Some economists focus on lifestyle changes in Asia where, for instance, average Chinese citizens consume twice as much meat as they did 20 years ago. And, of course, high oil prices make everything more expensive, from transportation to labor.

What to do? International experts and policy makers have suggested various measures to reduce the sting of price hikes. They are discussing changes in agricultural policies, increases in food supplies and the establishment of food security measures. Why, though, should we trust those who were unable to prevent this crisis to be able to solve it? And, in fact, the disproportion between efforts and conferences targeting this problem and the actual results is overwhelming. It is as if humanity as a whole were struck dumb by its own glaring failure.

Maybe what is lacking is not competence or goodwill, but a culture, a rightful set of motivations and ideals, not only at the international level, but locally.

Without a new culture, it is hard for us to look any further than our own plot of land. Wealthy countries will keep wasting enormous amounts of food, politicians will only propose short-term solutions to get re-elected, and the money chasers will keep playing deadly games in the international stock markets.

### **Think Locally**

I'm continually encouraged by stories about initiatives that worked. For instance: India relieved the debt of millions of its farmers; Malawi donated bags of fertilizers to farmers that tripled their yields; Thailand endowed each village with a fund from which villagers could get low-rate loans; and Mexico distributed 20 tons of food in Haiti.

Then there are others, initially successful but eventually disastrous, that also make me pause. Some farmers followed the advice of foreign experts and managed to increase their yields, but since they didn't have silos in which to store it or roads over which to distribute it, they watched it rot away, finding themselves poorer than before.

Large-scale solutions are important, but technological innovations are doomed to fail if we lose sight of the individual, the lone farmer with his specific needs, known only to himself. Lots of local farmers, motivated and supported, can save a whole nation from starvation. And they can do so in a sustainable way.

### **A Culture of Giving**

The stakes are high, the game immensely complicated and no one has the key to the solution. What seems clear, though, is that in our increasingly interconnected world, what we need is a new generation of politicians and bureaucrats who are able to reverse the suicidal journey on which humanity has embarked. What we ask is that they understand the importance of the local while keeping their eyes trained on the global, and that they speak for a strong and committed public opinion.

This brings us back to the need for a new culture, a "culture of giving." The damages wrought by the pseudo-culture of hoarding are plain to see: there are people who die of starvation when no less than 12 billion people could be fed if only there were a coordinated and capable international effort to distribute food.

The "Our Father" says, "Give us today our daily bread." We need a hand: let's ask for it. However, let us also remember that, as people used to say in times past, God helps those who help themselves.

### **Doing Our Part**

The magnitude of the food crisis can make us feel tiny and helpless, but there is something each one of us can do. We can all adopt a simpler lifestyle, mindful of not wasting food and water, being less dependent on meat consumption and maybe even including an occasional fast. It's not easy to change habits, but if we don't do it now voluntarily, at some point we'll have to do it out of necessity.

Finally, we can also donate our time abroad or support financially organizations we trust, such as AMU ([amu-it.eu/english](http://amu-it.eu/english)), Catholic Relief Services ([crs.org](http://crs.org)) or New Humanity ([new-humanity.org](http://new-humanity.org)).

### **Captions:**

Villagers at a distribution center in Haiti hand their bags to an aid worker to receive food in July. The Haitian population was particularly vulnerable even before September's catastrophic hurricanes. Left: the food crisis is also being felt in the U.S., where 13.3 million children under 18 are poor. A family in front of their home, scheduled for foreclosure. Opposite: An elderly woman, one of the Sudan's many internally displaced, gets ready to receive emergency food aid.

**Box:**

**Facts and Figures**

- Rises in food and fuel price lead to social unrest in at least 25 countries.
- Food reserves are at their lowest in 30 years.
- Export bans on certain food drive prices up with less available food.
- In poor countries people spend 60% of their budget on food, compared to 10-20% in rich countries.
- The U.N. food agency (WFP) needs US\$4.5 billion to feed 70 million people during 2008. By June only \$2 billion had been received.
- 100 million were forced to go hungry by high food prices (World Bank report).
- About 1 billion people live on less than US\$1 a day.
- High prices may delay any progress to the 2015 Millennium Development Goals by 7 years.
- According to new Census data, 13.3 million U.S. children under 18 are poor, up from 12.8 million in 2006.

More information at [wfp.org](http://wfp.org)