

First published by the [Triple Crisis Blog](#)

October 7, 2014

Feeding the World: The Ultimate First-World Conceit

Timothy A. Wise

Since the food price spikes of 2007-8, global hands have been wringing over the question, how will we feed the world? Population keeps growing, food-producing resources like land and water become more scarce, climate change introduces a dramatic uncertainty.

The images are downright Malthusian. The urgent recommendation is to produce more food, quickly. It is the theme of this year's [World Food Prize](#).

The question is fundamentally flawed, as is the Malthusian panic. There is no "we" who feed the world. There are, mostly, hundreds of millions of small-scale farmers. And there is no abstract "world" out there needing to be fed. There are about one billion hungry people, nearly all in developing countries. The majority are some of those same small-scale farmers. The rest are poor because they are unemployed or underemployed.

Increasing the industrial production of agricultural commodities does almost nothing for these people. Oddly enough, it can even make them hungrier.

Who feeds whom?

In practice, "we" all know whom "we" mean when we ask how "we" will feed the world. We mean industrialized societies, with their high-yield industrialized agriculture. But industrialized farms produce only 30% of the food consumed in the world today. [Seventy percent is produced by small-scale farmers](#). And it's mostly not traded across borders; only 15% of food is traded internationally. Eighty-five percent is consumed by the farming household, traded locally, or sold in domestic markets.

The conceit that first-world farmers feed the hungry is just that: conceited. What industrialized agriculture produces are agricultural commodities that serve as raw materials—occasionally as food, often as animal feed. It produces a lot of those raw materials, and the output has a lot to do with international prices for food commodities.

But the volume of that production has very little to do with whether the hungry are fed. By some estimates, we currently grow enough food today to [feed ten billion people](#), more than the projected global population in 2050.

The hungry are hungry not because there isn't enough food but because they don't have the incomes to buy it. Or to grow it. An estimated [70% of the hungry](#) in the world today live in rural areas.

They can end up hungrier because of higher production of agricultural commodities. Cheap,

industrialized rice or corn comes as a double-edged sword. If the farmers have any cash, lower prices mean they can afford more food. But if they grow these same crops, the prices they can get for their own rice or corn are lower thanks to the international competition. So they have less cash.

[Studies have shown](#) that high crop prices are better for the rural poor, even if they drive up the cost of food. Why? Money flows to the domestic agricultural economy, spurring investment, creating jobs, and raising wages.

Two ways to feed the hungry

There are two ways to better feed the hungry: increase the amount of food they can produce or create decent work for them. Industrialized agriculture does neither of these things well.

Its technologies are poorly suited to the needs and environments of small-scale developing-country farmers. Hybrid seeds and chemical inputs all cost money; few small-scale producers can afford them without government subsidies, and even then they often lack the credit they need to sustain the cash demands of industrial production. In Malawi, few farmers could afford the recommended second application of fertilizer, leaving their hybrid maize yields little better than if they had used traditional seeds.

What about creating jobs? Industrialized agriculture is capital-intensive, not labor-intensive. By definition, it increases productivity by substituting technology – tractors, irrigation, chemical inputs, seeds – for labor. Each kilo of rice might be a little cheaper as a result, but the number of people who get an income from that production is often dramatically reduced. If the high-yield rice displaces small-scale rice producers, the net impact on jobs and livelihoods can be negative.

But can't societies just jump-start development by bringing in foreign capital and expertise? That is the premise of the Obama Administration's [New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition](#), which seeks to infuse private capital into African agriculture through the magic of "public-private partnerships."

At best, such investments will develop only land, not societies. They will produce primarily for export, not the domestic market. They will employ few people and train few farmers in more productive farming practices. They certainly won't feed the hungry.

If we want to see that the world is well fed, we should stop looking to industrialized agriculture to solve the problem. We should address the problem where it lies: by increasing small-scale food production, particularly among women, and by pursuing economic policies that increase, rather than decrease, employment and livelihoods.

Direct investments in improving smallholders' farm production, using sustainable and appropriate technologies, are precisely what are needed if "we" want to feed "the world." This has always been the [first and most important step toward economic development for agricultural societies](#). It worked for China. It worked for South Korea. It's working for Vietnam, which has become a global rice exporter thanks to public investments in smallholder rice production.

The recent price spikes were real, and so are the looming resource constraints. But the answer is not simply to increase the production of industrialized agricultural commodities. "We" have to remember

who the hungry are. And “we” have to stop assuming that bigger harvests in Iowa, or Brazil, will give them more food. At best, this can reduce food prices. That can make a small difference to a poor consumer, but not as big a difference as helping them grow more food or giving them a job that pays them enough to feed their families.

So let’s invest in small-scale farmers and get them more land and resources. And let’s favor policies that create decent jobs. And while we’re at it, we in the United States should put our own house in order. We should stop [wasting 40% of our own food](#) and [feeding 35% of our corn to our cars](#). “We” have a lot to say about the amount of food that is available in the world.

Timothy A. Wise is an Open Society Fellow researching a [Rights-Based Approach to the Global Food Crisis](#). See his paper and report, [Rising to the Challenge: Changing Course to Feed the World in 2050](#).