

Food and thriving people in the 21st century

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Recently I wrote a paper called food and thriving people in the 21st century. I deliberately avoided the use of the term food security, which I guess everyone's heard about these days. In fact, it's all over the place and the reason I've avoided it is because today it's become a bit like motherhood and apple pie. It's something everyone says is a good thing and generally says, well, of course what we're doing is all going to help food security for the future. But I also used that title because I'm really concerned about the future of my kids – and if they have them, their kids - and everyone's children for the future 'cause this century, while it's full of fantastic possibilities, is also full of real big dangers and one of my concerns is that unless we get the way we deal with food right, then those dangers will be more likely to occur in terms of conflicts and so on.

So what I want to do here is give you a little sense of what's going on today, why I think we need to look at things differently, and some of the opportunities we have for action around that.

Part 1: Rethinking Food Security

Now, in fact, the first time food security really became a big talking point was when I started out – oh, what nearly 40 years ago - and started a new journal in my first job on food policy. And we talked about a lot of the issues we're talking about still today. So there's always a bit of a sense of déjà vu around today erm when I hear some of these talks, but in the mid-70s the key focus for food security was really about production.

And I'll quote you something from the World Food Summit in 1974. They talked about food security being the

“...availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”

It's not surprising that was this focus on production and smoothing out consumption the mid-70s 'cause we'd had major famines in the early 70s, there'd been a big price rise in oil, there'd been a lot of disruption to the economic system and there was still a lot of hunger and malnutrition. What's upsetting in a way is that we're still talking about so many of those same things today. Yes, we feed more people in the world than there were then but actually we have nearly as many hungry people as there were then. There are 870 million hungry people according to the FAO in 2012 that is down from about billion and that number had gone up to a billion because of big price rises in 2008 and nine. We've got maybe 2 billion people of micronutrient deficiencies but even more bizarrely, and this wasn't the case in 1970s, there are now an estimated 1.6 billion people who are overweight at least 300 million of whom are obese. So at a personal nutritional level for everyone in this world this food system isn't functioning well.

But it's not just about that personal level. It's also that it's a very unequal distribution of problems. Everywhere the poor are affected worst - whether it's because of the consequences of overweight and obesity or going hungry it's the poor who are affected most. And most poor people still live in rural areas 75% according to World Bank figures and a huge number of people still depend on agriculture in this world about 2 1/2 billion. So this is not a really well functioning system for the humans in it. And the other problem we have is this massive loss of biodiversity in the world due to the kind of farming systems that we've got. So there's a real set of issues about carrying this system forward in the 21st-century.

One of the key changes we've seen around the food system and that's led partly to this huge increase in overweight and obesity has been to do with changing who eats what. [one of] The key elements in all of this that's starting to affect human health is the way advertising and marketing has been used to help shift our perceptions of what the good life is, what's desirable, what isn't - not just directly in advertising but through images in films, product placement, aspirational things that you want.

Now I'm talking here about health as is defined by the World Health Organisation:

“health is a state of complete physical mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”

but today, as Gerard Hastings of the Institute for social marketing pointed out in an article in the British Medical Journal recently, marketing really starts to harm health. As he said

“the marketing campaigns of multinational corporations are harming our physical, mental and collective well-being”

What we're being encouraged to aspire to and see as normal is really not something that's healthy either for ourselves, or for our environment and the way we produce our food.

And that takes me back again to thinking about food security. By the year 2000 ish, we'd got a new definition of food security, which had gone broader than production. It recognised that there were other aspects, and by then the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN was talking about food security as being:

“a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”

But if you think about that definition, as more and more people have, it misses out some key things. At a personal level, it misses out the sense of fear people feel when they don't know where the next meal is coming from, or sometimes shame in having to beg for food or ask for food. If we think about it more broadly, about the environment, and how well we're gunner to manage maintaining our food supplies it says nothing about the sustainability of our production systems. So there's a whole lot of things that needs to be added in.

But if we think about it even further, it doesn't really address issues to do with power and control - who has what say in what land is used for, who decides if the land is used to produce food or feed or fuel or fibre. Those issues are the kind of issues that the food sovereignty movement of peoples' and peasants' movements around the world, have picked up on and said actually we need to have more control over local areas. And that's one reason I'm not really keen on talking about food security. I think we should talk about food and how it fits into the overall thriving communities and how it fits into ensuring long-term human security. And when we're talking about that, as Paul Rodgers will go into in more detail - we're talking about four major challenges for this century.

Part 2. Four key threats

The big one that we've all been talking about, I guess, is climate destabilization, which is the result, the unintended consequence, of a fossil fuel based industrialization that's been going on for nearly 200 years. That is altering weather patterns, more extremes, more fluctuations. So harvests are going to be more unpredictable we're going to need the kind of grain reserves etc to meet those unpredictabilities. That's the big threat.

The next one which we don't talk about as much is the continued marginalisation of the poorest in the world and the fact that in most countries in the last 10 years inequality has been getting bigger. This is not a recipe for a healthy and peaceful future. And if you actually look at some of the numbers and the numbers I have a still from 2000 but they've not changed unfortunately that much, about 86% of the household wealth of the world is owned by just 10% of the population and 50% of the world's population owns 1% of the household wealth. There is a very great disparity in wealth and also an increasing disparity in the levels of income between the highest and the lowest paid people both within countries and across the world.

The next big threat is over how we deal with the competition for resources that exists for energy, for water, for food, for land and minerals, and if we do that in the way they we've historically done it as human societies we know will end up fighting. Again that is a way we mustn't go down the century. We need to work out how to share these resources equitably.

And the final big threat usually doesn't get a look in, in most discussions in food and environment and that is the continuing high level of global militarization. So that as a species we devote so much of our creative energy and talent and money and resources to looking for better means of destruction, better means of killing each other.

The other thing we have to recognise is that today the new technologies, the scientific revolutions in biology, offer opportunities to create new weapons, biological weapons and we're looking for means to make sure that doesn't happen in biological and toxin weapons Convention and other ways to make sure we don't weaponise the things that we could. Unfortunately, if you look at the Department of Defence's budget in the United States for 2012, out of their \$12 billion they took \$2 billion to look at these new technologies, synthetic biology, nanotechnology, biotechnology. So this militarisation is a key area we have to address.

Part 3. A thought experiment

I want you to just imagine for a second, that you are in a group of people wherever you're listening to or watching this, in the 1910s and you are being asked to think forward to 1950, because today we're hearing a lot of talk about 2050 and rationalist projections of how the world will be. Now I very much doubt that any of you, in the 1910s in your little group, would have been very good at predicting what the world would have been like by 1950. Depending where you lived in the world you might have got the idea that there'd be a First World War because it was very imminent in the early 1910s. Even if you're in that war, and we're talking the mid tens, you probably wouldn't have realised that there would be an epidemic that killed more people than the war itself afterwards, there'd be the creation of an entirely new economic and political bloc in the United Soviet Socialist Republic the USSR, you probably wouldn't have got the depression, the Second World War, the invention of creation and use of weapons of mass destruction in the forms of nuclear weapons, and by 1950 a new Cold War with a split in the world too.

Yet today you're being told that we can carefully and clearly predict towards 2050. I think we have to be a bit skeptical about this. I think if we're thinking about the earth's physical system then we can be reasonably sure on the basis of the good science that's around, that this system will react in particular ways to the massive amounts of greenhouse gases that we're putting into it and that the climate destabilisation stuff we can get roughly right. I think it's very unlikely that we can get how our human societies, with the institutions, the governments, the structures we've got in it, are going to respond to those other problems this century, unless we start to think very differently and act differently to what we've done. Because, like the 1910s, this is a time of declining powers, big power shifts in the world, new technologies barely at their beginning that are gonna have an impact on what the options are, and really, we have to think big and think different about how we're gonna respond to these.

Part 4. Food at a crossroads

Now I think food is a real focus that we need to look at for how we deal with these different challenges, cause how we deal with food is probably going to tell us whether we'll be successful or not with the rest of them. And there are really two very different futures and these have been mapped out in a number of reports in the last few years. There was a really big report like the millennium a core system assessment which drew together scientists from all over the world to look at the kind of agricultural knowledge, science and innovation we need for the future of agricultural development and they produced a huge report called 'Agriculture at the Crossroads' and that basically said we need to really rethink the agricultural system somewhat we need to look at a more agro ecological approach the future of food and farming.

The British government did a subsequent report on the future of food and farming. The French government did er, sponsored a report that was done looking at different scenarios for the future. But perhaps one of the most interesting ones that has not got a lot of coverage, and that came out of the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research of the European Commission's third foresight view. And they very helpfully really laid out the two alternative futures that we have for the way we go with food and farming, one of which they call the productivity narrative.

Now that is really around the idea that we human beings are pretty clever and inventive folk, that we'll find a technological fix for any of the problems we create. Erm, that we're gonna use every technology trick that we've got in the book - re-engineer all the plants and animals if we need to. Er, re-engineer the climate system. That we're going go for high productivity, that we continued economic growth is just accepted there's just no question about the need for that and somehow or other demand just exists in a vacuum. It's not influenced, it's is not shaped, it's not pushed in a particular direction. And that caricature really does capture whole way of thinking. It's a technological optimists view of the future and it really discounts the value of any thing for the rest of life on the planet if it isn't of use to us.

Now the other narrative they caricature, they call the sufficiency narrative. And this says look, we're basically biological creatures. We need a healthy environment to live with. We need the kind of science that helps us understand the agro-ecology and ecological approaches to food and farming and build on that. That we also need to value and celebrate and use the diversity and maintain that diversity we have to keep these systems functioning. That small farmers have a real crucial role in all this as does equity. As does having fair and just systems that distribute the wealth and the food that is created and don't let it concentrate.

Now the thing I'd add to that productivity narrative that they do is actually it's a narrative in which it'll be a kind of corporate feudalism, I'd call it, in which we will increasingly have a licence to use our seed, or our music, or all kinds of things to relatively few corporate bodies in a very different kind of relationship to the one we normally assumed with real property.

But you know, there's a couple of other alternative futures we really want to avoid one of which causes collapse. Whether it's from financial systems collapsing, or the use of weapons of mass destruction, or the collapse of the immune systems and the infection control systems 'cause of overuse of antibiotics or what have you. And they're a real possibility, so we mustn't ignore those, we need to guard against those. And the other future we need to guard against, which is the one unfortunately we seem to be going down, is a world that splits into two directions so that the richest 1 1/2 to 2 billion live as long and as well as they can and the rest carry the can for the consequences of such a lifestyle. And unfortunately that seems to be the direction we're going but it isn't a very good direction, so should avoid that.

This is the worst-case, gloomy scenario. The great thing is it doesn't have to be like that.

What do we learn if we reflect on the food system and where we've got to today. Well, it could all be different. We have opportunities to make it different. The institutions in it that shape it, they've all been created. The legal frameworks, we make them up so we can remake the. We can rethink them. But it means being innovative but not simply innovative in a technological way within the continuing trend that we're on because that will not solve the problems that we've got. It means thinking about what kind of innovation we need, in what area, and that's from social, economic, institutional, legal, all kinds of areas not simply the technological. But in a world where innovation is used all the time and automatically seen as a good thing, we should remember innovation isn't necessarily good thing. As the head of the Organisation of economic co-operation

and development said when speaking about the innovation that we'd seen in the financial sector:

“We are in our current fix because of an excess of financial innovation driven by ever-increasing thirst for short-term profit. We now need to rewrite the rules of finance and global business.”

Part 5. Transforming food systems and societies

What we mustn't do is repeat the same thing in the food system as we've done in the financial system. And we also need to recognise the need to rewrite a lot of rules there as well. But thinking ahead, this takes us into the question of changing systems - of thinking about systems and how we do alter them. And there's a fantastic book by Donella Meadows that deals with this. She reflected on her lifetime's work and came up with about 13 leverage points you need to address if you want to change things - from the things that are least effective in changing the system. That's fiddling with the numbers to the things that are most effective and those are things like what are the rules and the incentive systems that drive the actors to do what they do. What is the capacity that you keep for self-organisation, for the little people throughout the world to respond to the changes to do what's necessary in where they are. To be clear about what your goal is. Is the goal for your food system or for your farming to generate food or is it to feed whatever will make the most money, which may be biofuels, or feed or what have you. So it's about having those clear. And the really big one is to change the mindset, the paradigm and that's where we come to the heart of the challenge that those two caricatures of the future narratives are. We have to change our mindset from the productivity narrative to the sufficiency narrative.

We need an economic system that's based on the ecological principles and the principles of equity that we've talked about. Now there's actually a lot of work going on on this, the New Economics Foundation talking of the great transition, the Worldwatch group in America talking about rethinking consumption, even the previous president in France, the Sarkozy commission, looking at rethinking gross domestic product cause it's a terrible measure of progress. And there's a nice report produced a few years ago from the sustainable development commission in Britain by Tim Jackson who made a couple of really important points. He said in his report called 'Prosperity without growth' which is about rethinking the meaning of prosperity in the north and the nature of growth the South:

“There is as yet no credible, socially just, ecological sustainable scenario of continually growing incomes for a world of 9 billion people...”

He also noted that:

“simplistic assumptions that capitalism's propensity for efficiency will allow us to stabilise the climate and protect against resource scarcity are nothing short of delusional”

Part 6. Taking action

Now we need to draw together these big picture things about economics and so on to focus on the practices that we have in food and farming and progressively move away

from the industrial, fossil-fuel-based model we have to a more agro-ecological model that based on cycles and recycling.

But the question is how do we do this, who does what? That's one of the questions I'm always asked in talks – what do I do? Well, I want to try and help you think about where you place yourself in what needs to be done - and I'm gonna use this trusty prop, my arm, to try and describe to you a four dimensional thing. Now the question is who acts imagine this horizontal axis is who acts. Well, there's individuals who act, there's individuals in community - civil society groups, trade unions, church groups what have you - and corporate actors, local and national government institutions, corporations. The next thing, imagine now we've got a 45° angle going up. To what end is their action directed and for this I talk about the four 'Rs'. I've taken three of them from Colin Tudge's work and added a fourth. Well they are revolution, reform, renaissance - that's bottom-up activity - and resistance to things going in the direction that you don't want them to go. And now we have a vertical access and this is picking up on the Donella Meadows' work. What levers are you trying to use when it comes to changing whatever it is you're trying to change? And those are the high-level levers - I'm interested in system change - so that's the rules and regulations, that's being clear about what the goal is, that is about changing the paradigm, that's about supporting the capacity for self-organization, which is the same as Renaissance.

So now I've really got a three-dimensional shape. You could put this together as a cube if you put it into three dimensions. So that's a big volume in which action happens. And the thing that doesn't go in a nice neat straight-line is addressing the issues of power and control and that moves around within this volume. So when you're thinking about what do I do, my bit, well you can think about what you do as an individual, and there's lots of advice you get about that, what you might do as individual in a group - you might want to join particular groups with particular objectives. How you want to work within your institution, your corporation, your government, how you might want to lobby those governments.

Now personally, for me, I'm interested in a revolution the paradigm - we need to think differently and move to a new direction. I'm interested in reframing the rules and incentives so that it encourages people to go in that direction and not in the direction we don't want them to go. I'm interested in supporting the capacity for self-organisation and renaissance, which I hope is what you might pick up from using some of this and decide for yourselves what you want to do. And, of course, I'm interested in encouraging resistance against the direction of travel when it's not taking us in the one want to go. So that's my particular interest. I am also trying to use what skills and knowledge I have, within that framework, to direct it different parts within that big volume.

So, what do you do as an individual? Well there's lots of stuff but they tend to focus on what you can do personally which tends to be around your eating habits you know, Michael Pollan's eat real food and so forth, they focus around health concerns, so they tend to focus relatively narrowly on me and mine were I'm at, what I can do, and they make a difference, and it's worth doing.

But then the next step is to say well what do I do with other friends with interested people with the same concerns and that is where when you get together you are more effective. If, if you're in a governing body of an institution and they have catering then

you might be looking at the catering policies and the provisions and the training arrangements in the fairness of them. You might be looking at how your farming practices are being done in your farmers group and whether there are things you should be changing.

And then the third area is what to do as an institution or what do you push the institutions to do and here there is really quite a big agenda because there are a lot of things are needed. Now no one of us can do all of them but if we start to recognise that these things are all connected, because I'm doing this bit here but not that bit there, that's not a problem as long as we can have someone else doing that bit there and together we can start moving things in a different direction. So if you're thinking about intellectual property rules, for example, then that's about rethinking the patent system and, and not going down the direction we're being pushed to patent everything. If we're thinking about grain reserves, which have really got neglected, in the face of climate change what matters is having physical grain reserves somewhere, quite a lot of places around the world, so that when the expected but unknown problems occur and we'll have real food available. Yes, it's expensive but it's like insurance you have it not 'cause you want to use it but because when you need to use, it's absolutely essential

Part 7. Final reflections

I think there's three reflections I want to end with. One is we can physically produce enough food in this world to feed everyone adequately through the middle of the century and beyond if that's what our goal is for the land that we've got. Secondly, that you shouldn't copy the Western diet if that's not what you're already eating and if it is what you're eating there's a huge amount of change we need to have to our Western diets if we want to avoid massive problems in diseases from diabetes to cancers to coronary heart disease, as well as having ridiculous demands upon the world's environment. And the third thing is we do need to do things differently in our economics and that means looking through the blandishments that the advertising and the cultural icons will suggest is what you should aspire to. What you should aspire to I would suggest is enough and having enjoyable relationships with people and planet around us. And you know there's quite a lot to celebrate as well , 'cause although we've perhaps focused on the challenges, we have established through our collective institutions - through the United Nations agencies, humanitarian agencies that help refugees, that deliver food to people in emergencies, not perfectly perhaps, but we've done a great deal. We've created also legal frameworks which don't have much force as yet on the right to health, the right to food, and Olivier De Schutter a UN rapporteur on the Right to food will talk more about.

So there's also stuff to celebrate and to build upon as we look ahead. But you know I think the biggest paradigm shift of all goes back to this photograph that was taken when I was a lot younger.

This is the first ever image of the planet on which we live. This shining blue and white ball in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of blackness, taken from the Apollo 8 mission on its way to the moon, taken more or less as an afterthought cause they were focused on taking pictures of the moon not the earth, but this is the first time we ever saw ourselves as humans on the little place that we live. Actually folks this is home, this is the local, it's where all of us live whatever our religions or ethnic groups all

nationalities we are many diverse peoples, with all kinds of skills and cultural traditions, and now big challenge is to recognise we are one peoples with much diversity. This is our home what we thought of as global actually is local and what is local is increasingly global and we are now connected in a way we've never been before. But it also gives us the opportunity to celebrate the fact that if most of us are fortunate enough to live a full lifespan, we have a perspective that goes back 100 years and forward 100 years. Back to our grandparents, forward to our children and our children's children or our friends children's children. This gives us a much better perspective to look at the future, despite the current fights and conflicts we have. We do have an opportunity to do things differently and food is a core thing to demonstrate that. It helps us celebrate life throughout the world in different cultures with different festivals and it's our opportunity to build that future.

[See website for further reading]