

Viksnins, George J.

Article — Digitized Version

American diets and third world food

Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Viksnins, George J. (1976) : American diets and third world food, Intereconomics, ISSN 0020-5346, Verlag Weltarchiv, Hamburg, Vol. 11, Iss. 4, pp. 120-122,
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02928671>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/139364>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

American Diets and Third World Food

George J. Viksnins, Washington *

One major concern of the Third World, with its emotional and moralistic overtones, is the production and distribution of food. Unfortunately, however, the world food situation is very complex and any over-simplification is counter-productive. This article confronts the myths with the facts playing a role in the discussion and underlines in particular the food aid distribution problems.

One of the major themes in recent discussions of "The New International Economic Order" is the great and growing imbalance in resource use per capita. Third World spokesmen point out the wastefulness of Western Technology, a civilization literally built upon the burning up of irreplaceable fossil fuels, and call for greater efficiency and equity in resource use as a common goal. One very key area of concern, not without its emotional and moralistic overtones, is the production and distribution of food. However, there is a strong tendency to treat this issue in overly simplistic and polarized terms — are you for or against a global food reserve? Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?

Polarization of Opinion

The first step in this polarization of opinion has already been taken. This is called "sensitizing the audience". On this particular issue, the sensitizing has taken a rather brutal turn — a contrived marriage is typically made of American dietary habits and Third World food needs. The gentle admonition of years ago — "Finish your dinner and clean your plate, dear; think of all the hungry people in the world" — is being replaced by most vicious imagery. A so-called "Right to Food" spokesman recently spoke to a student gathering in Washington, using the following "imaginary slides" for effect: a "slide" on the left shows a wounded soldier eating out of a tin can and the "slide" on the right, an American family sitting down for their holiday meal. Next, a "slide" on the left shows a swollen-bellied African child and the one on the right, a fat spectator cheering madly at a football game. This sort of an approach to the world food problem has also found its way into national magazines. Eaters of meat, steak in particular, are pictured as wasting grain that could be eaten directly, and users of tobacco are casti-

gated for wasting valuable land on that noxious weed — land that could be used to grow food for the world's hungry. At colleges and universities, a "World Food Day" has recently been organized each semester with fasts for world hunger, counter-culture meals, and vegetarians and organic gardeners hawking their wares and beliefs.

Many Americans are very susceptible to this. They are often idealistic, easily persuaded and committed, and are always searching for some sort of meaningful action — and, indeed, many of us are willing to bear considerable sacrifice. The solution seems to be simple: if we Americans, (and others in wealthy countries) were to eat less (and waste less), there's more left for the world's hungry. Unfortunately, however, in reality the world's food situation is very complex, and likely to become more so in the near future. Nevertheless, one simple statement can still be made: eating less by Americans will do absolutely nothing for the poorest nations of the world in the absence of an effective food aid distribution mechanism. At the present time, there is no link whatever between my abstinence and food availability in Bangladesh. Indeed, the linkage may be perverse: a lowered food demand in the US and Europe would probably lead to lower grain prices. Lower grain prices would suggest that farmers grow less — and operators of grain storage would hold back on existing supplies, hoping for a return of higher prices. Lower-priced food would be eaten by others capable of exercising effective demand, notably the Japanese, and the Russians and the Chinese, and the wealthier countries (and the well-to-do minorities!) of the Third World.

Counter-productive Over-simplification of the Problems

Over-simplification of the world food situation is counter-productive. Two problems exist, not one. It is sad but true that we Americans waste food,

* Economics Department, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

overeat and overdrink, and damage our bodies as well as our eco-system by foolish consumption habits. To me, at present, this seems a mildly serious problem — say, about 17th in the list of problems facing the world. Some solutions to our wasteful consumption system are already being provided by the workings of the price mechanism — more expensive gasoline may make us share rides and walk more, and more expensive steak makes chicken a better buy.

The second problem, malnutrition and starvation in much of the Third World, is a much more serious problem; coupled with population trends, it is indeed the most serious question facing all of mankind for the rest of the century. Unwittingly, in the past, our foreign aid has probably contributed to the problem — we provided the medical technology to cut death rates, and our "Food for Peace" shipments probably lowered incentives for Third World farmers to produce enough food to feed themselves. The total amount of US aid has been small, however — a couple of dollars per year per inhabitant in the typical recipient country — and the world's food/population problem is certainly not of our making. As events of the last twenty years have proved, we cannot or will not unilaterally shoulder the responsibility for "making things go right" for the rest of the world. I, for one, refuse personally to accept the blame and bear all of the guilt, when they go wrong.

Nevertheless, as a concerned American of a moderately internationalist outlook, I favour our participation in seeking solutions and looking to the future of mankind as a whole. There is no panacea. The planet probably cannot support 8 billion people in the year 2000, all enjoying current Western living standards. The crucial bottlenecks, contrary to popular opinion, are probably not resource-related — the world will not run out of wheat or oil or copper in any absolute sense — but mainly organizational and managerial. The key elements in devising a constructive response are found on two levels: (a) identification of the problem (separating very carefully fact and fiction), and (b) assessment of the costs and benefits of alternative actions.

Myths and Facts

As a small contribution on the first level, let us run through a few facts not often highlighted in discussions of the world food problem. While considerations of brevity do not permit a full discussion of each of these, citing just a few facts may be a useful antidote to "sensitizing sessions" of the sort mentioned earlier.

Myth: The world is running out of land for agriculture.

Fact: The world is presently utilizing about one-half of the total area suitable for growing crops and grazing cattle. Most of this land is not being utilized very efficiently or effectively. If the price of food rises relative to other goods, more land can be brought under cultivation — and more labor and other inputs can be used for agriculture to raise the productivity of presently cultivated land. One acre of land in Japan yields nearly 5,000 pounds of grain; in the US, about 3,200; in Indonesia, 1,800; and in India and Iran, around 1,000. While these statistics are not readily comparable, they indicate orders of magnitude quite well.

Myth: Population has outpaced world food production.

Fact: Over the last twenty years food production has increased by about 70 p.c., while world population has risen by about 45 p.c. Thus, on average, the 3.8 billion people in the world last year had 20 p.c. more food to eat per person than in 1954, when the number of people totalled only 2.7 billion. Even in the developing countries of the "Third World", food production has been outpacing population growth, though by an uncomfortably slim margin. It is true, however, that in a number of the very poorest countries calorie intake has been trending downward, and that malnutrition is a very serious problem. Average daily calorie intake in the US is 3,200 (with 72 p.c. in animal protein), while in India and Sri Lanka it is 1,800–2,000 per day (with roughly 12–15 p.c. being protein of animal origin). The United Nations estimates that 2,300 calories per day is the minimum amount needed for normal activity and health.

Myth: The US imports and consumes food from poor Third World countries.

Fact: This is a particularly vicious distortion. In her rather one-sided book, *Superpowers and Victims*, Charlotte Waterlow asserts that the industrial countries "can afford to import food, either from each other or from the poor countries" (p. 132) and that Peruvians "cannot afford at present to eat the fish they catch themselves, because they must earn foreign exchange to buy vitally needed equipment in the rich countries" (p. 139).

Poor countries on a net basis import grains, and have been net importers for nearly twenty years; why Ms Waterlow would have the Peruvians eat all of their anchovies is beyond me, unless she is inordinately fond of pizza. Such reasoning ignores the most elementary principles of comparative advantage and mutual gains from international trade, and contributes nothing to an analysis of the situation.

What is in fact true is precisely the reverse; North America accounts for a larger share of world grain trade than the OPEC countries do in petroleum. In the last few years particularly, the level of US grain exports has roughly doubled (while Canadian exports have remained the same and Australian exports have decreased slightly); a large part of US exports goes to poor countries in Asia and Africa, as well as to the centrally-planned economies.

It is as true to say that the rich are "pre-empting" food and fertilizer as it is to say that they are pre-empting Rolls Royces and Cadillacs. While the US did briefly embargo certain exports during the last two years, which was indeed a reprehensible act, the market system generally allocates scarce resources on the basis of ability to pay. At higher income levels, a much smaller part of total consumption is devoted to food and other basics. Thus, European imports of grains have actually fallen over the last ten years, and the Latin American countries have remained roughly self-sufficient.

Myth: World grain reserves are at an all-time low; concerted action by some international body is needed to rebuild them.

Fact: This argument is the central thesis of Lester Brown's *By Bread Alone*, which claims that world grain reserves ("index of world food security") have fallen to an amount equivalent to only 26 days of consumption by 1974 — less than a third of what they were ten years ago. Brown's computation includes the "grain equivalent of idled cropland" for earlier years, and therefore yields completely non-comparable results. In fact, 1974 estimated actual grain stocks of 90 mn metric tons are not significantly different from actual grain reserves of 99–100 mn metric tons which were being carried "way back" in 1966–67. Any economist who believes in the functioning of the market and the price system would have expected a decline in reserve stocks in 1973–74, when wheat prices more than doubled. Since all successful speculation tends to stabilize prices, one should not be terribly surprised that people sold off their inventories at attractive prices — expecting to rebuild them when prices come down to more normal long-run levels. Now that the US government no longer stockpiles grains, it becomes much more attractive for the private market to provide this stabilizing function.

The above analysis is not necessarily inconsistent with the proposal to build a "global food reserve" which emerged at the Rome Conference, and which has recently been espoused by the US De-

partment of Agriculture in a more concrete form. A carefully designed buffer stock for true emergencies is probably too costly a project for any one government, but it need not be damaging to the workings of the private market under normal circumstances. The question is basically one of size and, therefore, government or supra-governmental interference with grain supplies. Emergency food aid would probably be supported by most Americans, but continuous and growing subsidies to Third World food consumption would probably not be.

Food Aid Distribution Problems

In conclusion, let us return briefly to the central myth advanced by the food crisis advocates — that simplified diets in the US would contribute in a major way to a lessening of world hunger pangs. Can a day of fasting, eating less meat, and giving up smoking help? At the present time the only direct answer seems to lead to the private voluntary agencies; if we contribute the amount not spent on food to CARE or a similar organization, such a link can be established. The connection does not exist automatically, and it does not have to involve food — giving up a movie or a mink coat will do just as well. At the limit, let us consider a federal law that made eating steak a felony and devoted all available US land to growing grain, which seems to be the favoured solution among the more strident authors on this subject. There is little doubt that we could double or triple grain output in short order, and turn this over to an international body of some sort. Some of the "Right to Food" legislation now before Congress in fact envisages a program of such magnitude, in aiming for a 1 p.c. of GNP target in food aid. What then? Who is to get the grain, and on what terms? If this is to be distributed through regular commercial channels, the Russians and the Japanese are likely to wind up eating the steak we just gave up.

On the other hand, if we do not distribute this on the basis of effective demand, i.e., ability to pay, what other principle should we use? Need, you say. Let us give the food to those countries now below the minimum daily calorie intake standard. Even aside from the enormous organizational problem of getting the food to the neediest through a supra-governmental program, think of the impact on farmer incomes in India and Bangladesh. The experience of Sri Lanka in subsidizing food consumption and neglecting agricultural production should serve as a useful case study. Let us think of enforced sacrifice and governmental legislation only when we have some more concrete answers on this latter question.