

FROM FOOD SECURITY TO FOOD SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Most of the world has become used to food security - but this is not by any means the normal condition of mankind: we need think only of a number of famines during the past two hundred years that have caused tens of millions of deaths.

Some of these have had their roots in natural causes: some have been greatly exacerbated by inappropriate trade policies - like the potato famine in Ireland; but some of the worst - including the famine that followed the collectivisation of farms in the Soviet Union and the Great Leap Forward in Maoist China - were caused by catastrophically inappropriate ideologies.

The recent grounding of aircraft in Europe by the Icelandic volcano eruption illustrated how vulnerable our sophisticated societies are to the vagaries of nature. But what would happen if there were a really serious eruption that led to poor harvests throughout the world for two or three years or longer? The answer is that there would be famine - and those who would be the main victims would be citizens of poor countries that do not have substantial food reserves.

There is perhaps not too much that we can do to counteract the forces of nature. However, there is a great deal that we can do in normal times to increase agricultural production to ensure food security and food self-sufficiency. In particular, we can oppose ideological approaches that can easily lead to famine.

The first thing we must do is to make full use of developing technology to increase food production. The development of high-yielding grain varieties; the increased use of pesticides, new kinds of fertilisers and the expansion of irrigation systems have all contributed to what has become known as the "Green Revolution". The significantly higher yields in many countries have already gone a long way to ensuring food security in the countries concerned. For example, in India a new variety of rice called IR8 increased rice yields by a factor of almost 10.

Secondly, we should not let ideology influence our approach to agriculture. Some of the greatest famines in history - including those that followed the collectivisation of farms in the Soviet Union and the Great Leap Forward in Maoist China - were caused by catastrophically inappropriate ideological policies.

Similarly, and more recently, the ideologically driven land invasions in Zimbabwe have led to a severe drop in food production and to famine in some areas.

Ill-considered proposals for land reform in South Africa might seriously jeopardise agricultural production by seeking to break up the large farms that produce 80% of South Africa's food. They might unnecessarily undermine the property rights of productive farmers and discourage future investment in agriculture. Most of the land reform schemes have thus far led to a cessation or serious decline in food production. Land reform is essential - but it must be carried out in such a manner that it is fair to all parties and does not undermine food security.

Thirdly, we need to encourage fair global competition. In 2004 OECD countries paid their farmers some \$ 280 billion in subsidies. This has led to massive distortions in agricultural markets - to the development of butter mountains and wine lakes in Europe - and to the dumping of agricultural

exports in the markets of developing countries. This often had a devastating effect - not only on African food exports - but on the ability of Africans farmers to compete fairly in their own markets.

Failure to reach agreement on the phasing out of farm subsidies has been one of the main obstacles to success in the post Doha negotiations on global trade.

We need to open up agricultural trade. Producers in developing countries often find it very difficult to gain access to first world markets for their agricultural exports. The much acclaimed US African Growth and Opportunity Act opened up trade between the US and 37 African countries - but specifically excluded dairy products, cocoa, coffee, tea, tobacco, nuts and many types of fabrics.

Food production in Africa can be stimulated - not only by opening up access to African food exports in first world countries - but also by breaking down trade barriers between African countries themselves. Tariffs between African countries are generally high - which might explain why only 10% of Africa's trade is with other African countries.

In 2004 the World Bank calculated that liberalisation of agricultural trade between developing countries could lead to a benefit to them of \$ 80 billion.

To sum up, there is not much that we can do about catastrophic natural threats - apart from building up our reserves as Pharaoh did during the seven fat years!

However, we can do a great deal to ensure food security and ultimate food self-sufficiency by

- making full use of developing agricultural knowledge and technology;
- avoiding - at all costs - ideological approaches to food production;
- ending unfair trade practices - especially agricultural subsidies; and by
- opening up trade in agricultural products.