

Feeding and fuelling the future

by Pat Evans

UNDER THE HEADLINE 'The hungry planet', the *Independent on Sunday* carried a report by Geoffrey Lean, its environment correspondent, warning of the run down in world food stocks.

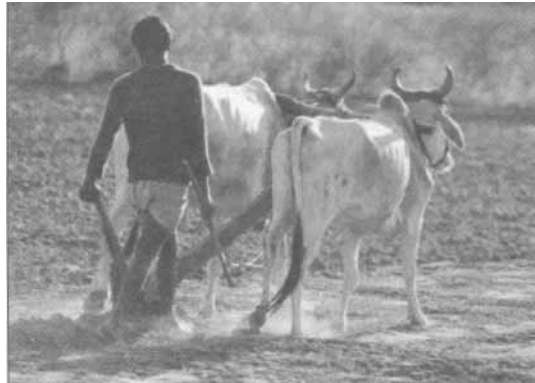
It was occasioned particularly by the shortfall in this year's harvest by food exporting countries. But he also points out that the over-all quantities of grain available will be permanently reduced by the use of crops for energy and the greening of the car industry. His conclusion is 'the only long term solution is to enable poor countries - especially the poorest people - to grow more food.'

The pursuit of cheap food

The most important factor in such a development is that it should be profitable. Phil Jefferys, an experienced Australian sheep farmer, poses the question: 'Why is there so much poverty in an industry which the world relies on?' The short answer must be the pursuit of cheap food. Prices rise in response to shortage, rather than rising costs of production. So while abundant harvests should be welcome, they *tend to put a financial squeeze on farmers.*

One thing, which the World Food Conference in 1974 signally failed to achieve, was any shared responsibility for maintaining world food stocks. Such stocks require good storage, which can be expensive, but they should not be built solely in areas of plenty. Four fifths of the world's food is consumed in the region where it was grown, and stocks need to be held within reach of areas likely to be in need. This would be made easier by the development of food processing industries in the countries concerned, but it has not been in the forefront of public thinking up to now. Asia is rated as a comparative success story in the battle to keep agricultural production ahead of rising populations. Yet there is serious concern among political leaders in both India and China at the growing economic gap between the rising middle class and the farmers. Each country now has affluent middle classes of several hundred million, and if they continue to get richer while the farmers remain impoverished, social upheaval is inevitable.

Yet there is plenty of experience to show that technical support and training can produce striking results in farm production, and the capital cost is modest. It is a job-led development rather than an exercise in the deployment of large scale machines. But there has been a reluctance to empower farmers and make them a priority.



Rural farming in India

Meeting in Cairo in February 2001, the African Farmers Committee of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) vowed to play a full role in mobilising and empowering farmers through strengthened organisations, which governments can recognise as effective and dependable development partners. The meeting discussed the role of farmers' organisations in fostering the co-operation and integration of Africa's national economies. It called on African Governments to harmonise policies, and standardise trade regimes, ensure political stability and facilitate the movement of people, goods and services. Present intra-regional trade in Africa is worth around \$2 billion in a \$50 billion domestic demand for food crops, which is expected to double in the next fifteen years.

Meanwhile in Europe and North America, biofuel production is gathering pace and increasing the competition on world grain markets. It will, of course, through its by-products make a substantial contribution to animal feed supplies, but already there is anxiety in some quarters that it may be over done, and suck in a disproportionate share of supplies.

One who has voiced his concern is Sir Peter Crane, the retiring Director of Kew Gardens. He worries that expansion of Palm oil production might come at the expense of the remaining

rainforest in southeast Asia, and that other biofuels will have to be grown without the kind of inputs which have traditionally gone into

Intensive agriculture. Although the latter question is already a preoccupation with food crops as well.

Certainly with available land per head steadily diminishing under the pressure of rising population and the spread of buildings and roads, every hectare must be looked after. Land which has been abandoned and some-times labelled worn out, can be brought back into cultivation, and land should no longer be taken out of production as part of EU policy.

An invaluable addition

At present the EU Commission hopes to deal with this in 2008. It is urgent because increasing quantities of maize, sugar, and wheat are being used for Ethanol production, and palm oil and oil seed rape for Biodiesel. They are an invaluable addition to a carbon neutral strategy, and underline the fact that farming has to become an expanding rather than a shrinking industry. They also provide a huge safety valve in the event of any future famine.

One thing is beyond argument - farming is in the front line for combating both poverty and climate change. If enough food can be produced by the poorest people, malnourishment will be in retreat. If renewable fuels can make a real impact on global warming, it will significantly relieve our pressure on the environment. They are two major issues for this century, and deserve to be under daily consideration.

Production will respond to profitability, and securing that profitability should be a priority objective worldwide. Shortages quickly raise prices, but it would be ridiculous to plan for shortage. Yet there is a flaw in the economic system which needs to be remedied when production is consistently less profitable than processing.

It makes sense for some farmers to get involved in processing, but it should still be normal for farms to be profitable in their own right. The comprehensive Stern report indicates that this needs to happen through a change in priorities on a global basis