

**Feeding the World:  
Immediate issues by Pat Evans, 14 May 2007**

The two goals of dealing with Climate Change and Poverty are more closely linked than many people realise. The awakening public interest in both subjects is a good moment to review the lessons which we are learning.

Farm profitability is the key to alleviating poverty, most of which is in the rural areas. As subsistence farmers begin to sell produce, they enter the cash economy. The Fair Trade ideal has recognised this, and the movement now has important evidence to contribute. It needs to become a universal concept in the food trade, and therefore to be recognised by the World Trade Organisation. Given such a situation, the farmers will grow their way out of poverty, so cheap food is not the priority need of the poor. Those who cannot buy may need Food Aid, discounted in the past by poor administration and corruption. It is perfectly possible to handle this without upsetting markets. Through Food for Work and special ration shops, it is perfectly possible to handle this without upsetting markets. Good governance is the key.

To combat Climate Change demands a change in lifestyle by the affluent in every country. It means that everyone individually needs to understand how to reduce their own carbon footprint. Carbon trading should not become a substitute for personal change by those who can pay to relieve themselves of the responsibility. But so far the production of renewable energy – starch or sugar for ethanol and vegetable oil for biodiesel – is raising the value of crops, to the much needed benefit of the farmer. It is not widely understood that at present 8% of the land under the Common Agricultural Policy is taken out of production because more food is not required. Some think the farmers are paid for doing nothing, but they have to manage this land according to strict rules, and are not permitted to grow food crops.

The plight of the orangatang in Borneo is widely blamed on the growing demand for Crude Palm Oil, which has led to increasing inroads on the rain forest in there. High prices for energy are assumed to override human judgement, but this is clearly a question of human motivation. Malaysia is the largest exporter of Palm Oil, and no rain forest land has been used since 1990. Less than 20% of Malaysia is used for agriculture, with more than 60% devoted to permanent rain forest – a proportion that has not changed in the last ten years and is governed by national law. The roundtable on sustainable Palm Oil formed in 2004 is dedicated to tackling these questions on a global basis.. It comprises growers, investors, traders, NGOs and retailers from around the world.

In reviewing these developments it is important to realise that research is always opening fresh possibilities. Present biofuels are only the first generation – the spearhead of the new bio-based economy. We shall start to use bio-refineries, just like oil refineries, to gain maximum outputs from the plant raw materials, but it will only be market driven as people come to understand its importance to the future.

It is undoubtedly encouraging that interest in methods of food production is steadily rising among the urban public. It has begun to lead on to the realisation that diet is the starting point for good health. Food is energy as much as fuel crops. But Nelson Mandela was clearly right, when he said that feeding everyone in the world properly was a moral rather than an economic problem. That change of attitude is the fundamental key to a new direction.

Machines continue to cover huge areas, but fuel costs may set new criteria for performance. In the tropics, at least, manpower and the need for jobs will continue to make human energy the key factor in the foreseeable future. The modern Food Industry is being forced to adjust to new challenges, and it is significant that one Tesco spokesman cited consumer pressure as the reason for raising the price paid for farmers' milk. The public desire for a fair deal could eventually dictate what the economy delivers. That is the root of the social democratic ideal, though it has yet to become a universal vision.