

America's Role in Feeding the World

*Compiled and Written by Craig S. Paterson
Revised March 24, 2003*

Because the United States exercises unparalleled global strength and because global challenges are so urgent and potentially explosive, America's role in the world is in question, here and abroad. While a large majority of Americans recognize the use of our vast military power is sometimes necessary to protect our own citizens, interests and allies, many Americans also hope to find more positive and life-affirming ways to practice our national role in the world. One critical element of America's potential role in the world has emerged in the future of the world's food. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that more than 800 million people—about one sixth of the population of the world's developing nations—are malnourished. There are many causes of hunger and poverty for children and their families, so the solutions are complex and will require significant leadership. How will America participate in the solutions? How will American provide leadership against hunger?

This issue forum identifies three approaches to America's role in the future of the world's food. Each approach offers a different diagnosis of our challenges in food issues. Each approach then provides a direction for public action, or a unique perspective on the opportunities available in these challenging food issues. These approaches include ideas and proposals that are drawn from a wide representation of the political spectrum. Some elements of the approaches are readily mixed, but not others, as each approach has its own priorities and agenda.

Approach #1 Food Is a Human Right

Agriculture produces food and food is different from all other commodities. Food is basic and must be treated with appropriate respect. This approach proposes that adequate food production and equitable food distribution should be the top priority in all international, national, state, local and non-governmental agencies.

Approach #1 Actions:

- ✓ Enact legislation in the US to make food a human right and lead the global community by example through domestic food programs to abolish hunger in America.
- ✓ Manage the food supply by mandating local, regional and global food production targets and quotas, and by subsidizing farm production when prices decline below sustainable levels.
- ✓ Ratify participation by the US in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—the international pact that upholds food as a human right.
- ✓ Totally separate agricultural resources and products from all international trade negotiations, creating a unique food aid and trade infrastructure.

Approach #1 Benefits:

- ✓ Hunger and its associated afflictions could be eradicated, and the US can lead in this humanitarian effort.
- ✓ The world would be a safer place for everyone—hungry and struggling people are more likely to resort to extreme measures in order to survive.
- ✓ Food production and distribution will become more efficient as more countries act on food self-sufficiency as a high priority policy.

Approach #1 Tradeoff:

- ✓ The prices of many imported food items would increase in the US, but the decreased dependency of developing nations on food imports would make the cost worthwhile.

Approach #1 Drawbacks:

- ✓ The US would lose its position as a major food exporter—US jobs would be lost.
- ✓ A complex food management system would be required that would just become another huge, dysfunctional bureaucracy.
- ✓ National sovereignty could be challenged when the UN is called to enforce food rights with economic sanctions or military intervention.

Approach #2 Research, Development and Education (RDE) Are the Answer

Remember the old saying: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for life.” This approach expands on this saying by proposing a wide range of educational efforts to make agriculture more productive, economically viable and sustainable in our country and around the world.

Approach #2 Actions:

- ✓ Dramatically increase public funding for domestic food-based RDE inquiry, focusing on food science but including all higher-education disciplines—designate 50% of these grants for international projects.
- ✓ Create agricultural research partnerships in every country in the world and provide funding to establish an initial global research base, identifying research goals in each climate area, countries, and regions.
- ✓ Conduct more research into food safety and make the findings available to the public in the US and around the world—decipher scientific jargon to make the information accessible to the public.
- ✓ Balance agricultural RDE by providing significant public funding agro-ecology, integrated pest management and sustainable production techniques.

Approach #2 Benefits:

- ✓ RDE are what we do best—it has revolutionized agriculture in the past and can do so again.

- ✓ CA, US and international farmers can learn new techniques, increase productivity, reduce crop losses and be more environmentally sensitive through RDE—farming can become a more viable vocation.
- ✓ RDE can change the image of the US from 'benevolent colonialist' to 'developmental partner'—the reputation of the US can be improved.

Approach #2 Tradeoff:

- ✓ Regulations on food safety to inspire acceptance in science-based products and methods may take many years, but the development of that trust would make the investment of time and energy worthwhile.

Approach #2 Drawbacks:

- ✓ There's already enough food in the world—the problem lies in access to food, distribution of food and the wealth required to purchase food.
- ✓ RDE that's funded by American taxpayers and private corporations might not be trusted by international farmers or consumers, feeling that our vested interest in agriculture will benefit mostly America.
- ✓ When the US provides inexpensive or free RDE for the world, foreign producers compete with US farmers who pay for the knowledge.

Approach #3 Free Trade Puts the Markets to Work

Our economic strength is the underlying reason for America's prosperity, and it's a powerful engine that can raise the standard of living and decrease hunger in the rest of the world. To make this power available to the world, we must rigorously promote the principles of free trade in food production and distribution.

Approach #3 Actions:

- ✓ Eliminate all US farm subsidies and trade barriers that interfere with food imports or exports in a totally free market.
- ✓ Work through the World Trade Organization (WTO) for the elimination of agricultural tariffs and export subsidies, particularly among developed countries, and for equal representation of developing countries in the WTO.
- ✓ Provide training and startup loans for small farmers who need to switch crops or have to leave farming completely.
- ✓ Provide food aid only in crisis or disaster situations and only as temporary relief.

Approach #3 Benefits:

- ✓ A truly free global food market will produce more total food, for more people, for the lowest cost.
- ✓ Free trade is totally decentralized and requires no bureaucracy to function.
- ✓ On average, American consumers and many agricultural producers will benefit from increased, long-term global free trade in food products.

Approach #3 Tradeoff:

- ✓ Elimination of farm subsidies will cause a painful transition in many American communities and higher short-term food prices, but the long-term benefits particularly in the economies of developing countries and long-term decreases in prices will make it worthwhile.

Approach #3 Drawbacks:

- ✓ Many developing countries have little or no experience with a free market system, so their transition period may be long and painful.
- ✓ Free trade could create so many low-cost food imports coming into the US that American production in some critical food sectors would disappear—this could affect US food security in times of international crisis.
- ✓ Some developing countries may continue growing cash crops to create wealth for a few leaders while low-paid workers must purchase relatively expensive food to survive.