

Food systems carry heavy burdens and politics are making things worse

To the Editor — The food systems of the world are being asked to carry a very heavy load these days. It used to be ‘fine’ if they were productive and supplied adequate food supplies to their households, community or country. Norman Borlaug received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for helping to achieve this goal for a generation, but he warned in his Laureate acceptance speech that the Green Revolution offered only a temporary respite, perhaps 30 years, before the return of Malthusian ‘solutions’¹.

The focus on food production as the solution to hunger was never entirely satisfactory. But keeping grain production ample and food costs low did give societies some breathing space to solve the household demand side of the food equation as well as the production side. After the colonial era ended in the wake of the Second World War, many poor countries sought this balance. Only a few in Asia succeeded².

Ensuring that food systems provide nutritionally balanced and healthy diets has also been a leading goal over the decades³. But the complex interplay among market incentives for farmers (to encourage them to invest in more productive technologies), low food prices for consumers (to keep the poor from starving) and powerful cultural dietary habits (perhaps deeply wired in our brains) stalled progress on the nutrition front. If anything, we have lost ground in recent decades in terms of global nutritional well-being. Obesity replaced hunger as the main policy concern before the COVID-19 pandemic put hundreds of millions more at risk of hunger.

A further objective for food systems is ecological sustainability. Although lip service has been paid for several decades, we are losing ground, not gaining it. Climate change, to which food systems are a major contributor, is making the sustainability problem much harder to solve.

With the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, approved by the United Nations in 2015, an entirely new set of objectives for food systems emerged. Food systems now must address “issues of inclusion and equity — putting people at the center”.

On top of these daunting challenges, the Russian war in Ukraine has imposed a fundamentally new reality on global supply chains for essential commodities. Integrated threats to fuel, fertilizer and food supplies

will be disastrous for the world’s poorest citizens, already suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic, even if the fighting stops by mid-year. But if the war drags on for a year or longer, the entire global economy will face disastrous dislocations, readjustments and retrenchments. These will threaten almost everyone’s standard of living. The political fallout is hard to imagine.

And so, it is reasonable to ask whether meeting these food-systems challenges is actually feasible. The trends are not encouraging. Not a single country, rich or poor, has resolved all of these issues historically, and there is little promise of doing so sustainably in the future. Still, two recent initiatives promise to bring more clarity to these issues, at least in terms of understanding their complexities and trade-offs.

The Food System Dashboard, an online, interactive database, has been built and maintained by a consortium of universities, think tanks and government organizations⁴. A substantial team of researchers is led by Professor Jessica Fanzo at Johns Hopkins University. The dashboard can be used to describe and analyse complex issues facing national and global food systems.

Although it is a ‘work in progress,’ it is an important new tool for policymakers who are grappling with how to meet the daunting, and often conflicting, objectives of raising agricultural productivity to feed another 2 billion people in the next 30 years or so; accomplishing this in an environmentally sustainable manner without exacerbating climate change; and, at the same time, working to make the entire food system address income and social inequalities and to bring marginalized food producers and consumers into the mainstream.

An alternative perspective is provided by a forthcoming book, *Universal Food Security: How to End Hunger While Protecting the Planet* by Glenn Denning⁵, Professor of Practice at the School for International and Public Affairs (SIPA) at Columbia University. Building on his own practitioner’s background of over four decades, Denning’s approach stresses field experience, learning by doing on the job, and participating in, or even leading, the process of change. This approach is very different from the data-driven approach

of the dashboard consortium, in which policymakers should rely on the best available data and high-quality analysis to drive change. The two approaches are, however, complementary — knowing what to do and then knowing how to get it done. Capturing the possible synergies will require a new generation of students, analysts and activists.

Both Denning and the principles behind the dashboard express optimism that the basic problems of hunger and malnutrition can be solved in a sustainable fashion. That optimism is based on obvious ‘possibilities’: the biological and physical realities staring us in the face. These problems can be solved. I came to a similar conclusion myself in *Food Security and Scarcity: Why Ending Hunger Is So Hard*⁶. But experience over the past decade or so is more sobering.

Why have we not made more progress despite the obvious potential? Here the dashboard analysts, and Denning, are basically silent. Both approaches emphasize the considerable heterogeneity across country–food-system types as evidence for hope: not all countries are failing at all of the tasks. But that is a false hope without an understanding of why no country has ever succeeded in solving all of these multi-dimensional problems in a sustainable, long-term fashion.

The answer is obvious: political systems have failed to come to grips with the problems. But this answer just pushes the issue deeper. Why do political systems, all of them so far, fail so badly at solving these complicated, long-term problems? Is it possible that the human brain, and human society, are not ‘wired’ to solve these kinds of problems?

Political decision-making is dominated by concerns that there is food on the table every day, that local opportunities to make a living are accessible and that the fruits of social and political cooperation accrue to our community or tribe only. In such a political environment, the short run always wins out over the long run, and it is impossible to mobilize society to solve life-threatening, but distant and somewhat fuzzy, problems.

Is there, then, no hope? In the past, we have muddled through. Churchill once observed that Americans could be relied

on to do the right thing after they had tried everything else. Do we have time for that? □

C. Peter Timmer  

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA.

✉e-mail: ptimmer63@gmail.com

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.