

Opinion | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Don't Ask How to Feed the 9 Billion

Mark Bittman NOV. 11, 2014

At dinner with a friend the other night, I mentioned that I was giving a talk this week debunking the idea that we need to grow more food on a large scale so we can “feed the nine billion” — the anticipated global population by 2050.

She looked at me, horrified, and said, “But how are you going to produce enough food to feed the hungry?”

I suggested she try this exercise: “Put yourself in the poorest place you can think of. Imagine yourself in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example. Now. Are you hungry? Are you going to go hungry? Are you going to have a problem finding food?”

The answer, obviously, is “no.” Because she — and almost all of you reading this — would be standing in that country with some \$20 bills and a wallet filled with credit cards. And you would go buy yourself something to eat.

The difference between you and the hungry is not production levels; it's money. There are no hungry people with money; there isn't a shortage of food, nor is there a distribution problem. There is an I-don't-have-the-land-and-resources-to-produce-my-own-food, nor-can-I-afford-to-buy-food problem.

And poverty and the resulting hunger aren't matters of bad luck; they are often a result of people buying the property of traditional farmers and displacing them, appropriating their water, energy and mineral resources, and even producing cash

crops for export while reducing the people growing the food to menial and hungry laborers on their own land.

Poverty isn't the only problem, of course. There is also the virtually unregulated food system that is geared toward making money rather than feeding people. (Look no further than the ethanol mandate or high fructose corn syrup for evidence.)

If poverty creates hunger, it teams up with the food system to create another form of malnourishment: obesity (and what's called "hidden hunger," a lack of micronutrients). If you define "hunger" as malnutrition, and you accept that overweight and obesity are forms of malnutrition as well, then almost half the world is malnourished.

The solution to malnourishment isn't to produce more food. The solution is to eliminate poverty.

Look at the most agriculturally productive country in the world: the United States. Is there hunger here? Yes, quite a bit. We have the highest percentage of hungry people of any developed nation, a rate closer to that of Indonesia than that of Britain.

Is there a lack of food? You laugh at that question. It is, as the former Food and Drug Administration commissioner David Kessler likes to call it, "a food carnival." It's just that there's a steep ticket price.

A majority of the world is fed by hundreds of millions of small-scale farmers, some of whom are themselves among the hungry. The rest of the hungry are underpaid or unemployed workers. But boosting yields does nothing for them.

So we should not be asking, "How will we feed the world?," but "How can we help end poverty?" Claiming that increasing yield would feed the poor is like saying that producing more cars or private jets would guarantee that everyone had one.

And how do we help those who have malnutrition from excess eating? We can help them, and help preserve the earth's health, if we recognize that the industrial model of food production is neither inevitable nor desirable.

That is, the kind of farming we can learn from people who still have a real relationship with the land and are focused on quality rather than yield.

The best method of farming for most people is probably traditional farming boosted by science. The best method of farming for those in highly productive agricultural societies would be farming made more intelligent and less rapacious. That is, the kind of farming we can learn from people who still have a real relationship with the land and are focused on quality rather than yield. The goal should be food that is green, fair, healthy and affordable.

It's not news that the poor need money and justice. If there's a bright side here, it's that it might be easier to make the changes required to fix the problems created by industrial agriculture than those created by inequality.

There's plenty of food. Too much of it is going to feed animals, too much of it is being converted to fuel and too much of it is being wasted.

We don't have to increase yield to address any of those issues; we just have to grow food more smartly than with the brute force of industrial methods, and we need to address the circumstances of the poor.

Our slogan should not be "let's feed the world," but "let's end poverty."

Frank Bruni is off today.

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