

Out of the Box



As long as nutrition bores politicians, public health nutrition will not make much progress. But just occasionally food, and even nutrition, does interest politicians, and here we are. Fasten your seatbelts! This just could be the dawning of the age of rational policies, prices and choices. On this general theme, have you ever wondered not where our leaders are really coming from? Read on, and remember that the correspondence column of this journal is meant for challenge and debate.

Let them eat chorizo?

The prices of various staple foods have rocketed in the last year or so. Even for credulous citizens this has wrecked claims, by finance ministers and other politicians, that they have got a grip and that inflation will surely remain low and under control.

The 'global food crisis' is hitting the headlines as I write. Masters of the universe gathered in Rome have been in rhetorical overdrive. Most interesting is what they have not said. Have any stated that now is the time to spend less? Have any suggested that money is not the main measure of progress and development? Have any challenged economic globalisation in its current form, which ruins vulnerable communities in impoverished countries? Have any quoted the experience of farmers in Africa, Asia or Latin America or, better, invited them to speak for themselves to the world's media? As far as I know no, they have not. Instead, the struggle has been to stay on the message that rising staple food prices, while a real cause for concern needing firm handling, are a technical glitch, and that progress and development – measured as growth in the supply and use of money – is ever onwards and upwards.

At the Rome food summit in early June, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, no doubt with a note of projected world population increases in his back pocket, said that world food production must increase by 50% by the year 2030. Jacques Diouf, director-general of the FAO, called for \$US 30 billion to avert food wars in Africa, Asia and Latin America, without saying who exactly would be entrusted with receiving, safeguarding and disbursing this treasure. Pope Benedict XVI also spoke, stating that hunger and malnutrition are 'unacceptable' and, perhaps after a briefing from the International Monetary Fund, urged nations to make 'indispensable' structural reforms. Patrick Wall, chairman of the EU-funded European Food Safety Authority, was for recycling. He questioned the

morality of feeding animals with cereals, and called for an end of the prohibition on feeding remnants of animals to animals⁽¹⁾. Dr Ban announced a UN task force chaired by himself to develop a Comprehensive Framework for Action, designed to generate sustained universal food security.

Meanwhile in Britain, cut-price no-frills supermarkets such as Netto and Lidl are booming. For *The Guardian*, restaurant critic and food reviewer Jay Rayner took up the challenge to go on safari into the dark heart of London's New Cross branch of the pile-it-high-and-sell-it-cheap Aldi chain. He purchased, opened and yes, tasted the cosmopolitan bush-tucker on offer⁽²⁾. There was 'lots to love', he averred. The sliced chorizo had 'huge depth of flavour'. The thin-cut salami had 'big-fisted porkiness'. The marinated mushrooms were not slimy; instead there was 'just real bite and a luscious, satisfying burst from the oil'.

For those without the wherewithal to shop for ready-to-slaver delicatessen in supermarkets, the UN has announced that this is the Year of the Potato. In Bangladesh consciousnesses are being raised by banners reading 'think potato, grow potato, eat potato'⁽³⁾.

No more cheap fuel

So that's alright, then? Well, no. For there is no answer to the sharp increases in the price of grains and other staple foods all over the world, if by 'answer' is meant subsequent corresponding sharp food price decreases. Say bye-bye to artificially cheap food, as well as to artificially cheap flights. Besides, the big issue is not price rises, but what these signify.

One of the consequences of democracy in its current forms is that most world leaders are here today and gone after this or the next term of office, turned over before they have time to engage with fundamental national and international issues, such as food security, even if they were inclined to do so. Faced with the prospect of increasing starvation in Africa and Asia, and discontented electorates in Europe and North America, the current batch started to jostle for headlines with apocalyptic sound-bites some time before the Rome summit. Josette Sheeran, the US citizen who is boss of the UN World Food Programme (of whom more below), has characterised rising food prices as 'a silent tsunami'⁽⁴⁾. This is an odd phrase, for a characteristic thing about the actual tsunami was its silence until the great waves hit. By contrast, falling grain production (both relative to population

and absolute) and consequent rises in the prices of rice, wheat and therefore bread and some other basic foods – observed, predicted and debated since the early 1990s⁽⁵⁻⁸⁾ – is now provoking very noisy riots in many countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East.

The price of standard human fuel will continue to increase, just as the cost of standard automobile fuel will continue to increase, for broadly the same reasons. The only real surprise is that any sentient person is surprised. As with oil, food prices will continue to rise before becoming stable. The reasons why are interrelated. These include increase in population, high-input farming, degradation of soil, resource depletion, climate change, the shift from plant- to animal-based food systems (still aided and abetted by the nutrition science establishment), the true costs of transport, other gross distortions of markets, and various downsides of economic globalisation such as oligopolic control of staple commodities, subsidised capital-intensive agriculture, and the use of food aid and trade, including dumping of surpluses, as an instrument of power^(9,10).

Maybe the price of staple foods will not stabilise. In which case, people in rich locations and countries will become inured to stories of mass starvation and constant riots, violence and wars in poor countries, but will not be insulated from such breakdowns in civil society, as tens and eventually even hundreds of millions of desperate families push their way into cities and over national boundaries in search of work and food. Could this happen? Some observe that this is exactly what is happening right now⁽¹¹⁾.

Be the change

Are you economising on your food and also fuel and flight bills? Your home-grown solutions may be a better model for international policy than those now being proposed by the current leaders of the World Bank, the UN and the G8. What's to do? Here are a couple of related tips for personal action, neither new, which take into account Mahatma Gandhi's line: 'Be the change you wish to see in the world'.

First tip: use less money. With food this means growing more of your own. It also means barter. Don't shop; swap. In my part of Brazil the extended family culture stretches to cousins of cousins, and it is still usual to give support as a gift. On trips, people often stay not in hotels but with family or friends. It is only recently in history that money has become the main means of exchange. It takes some time to get used to being rewarded or rewarding in eggs, herbs, cakes or hooch, or by mutual protection, advice, hospitality or embraces, but this is what country people traditionally have always done.

Staple foods can be cheaper; much depends on their source. Here is a local example. Rice is grown in the state of Minas Gerais where I live. Years ago producers in small

towns and rural communities here commonly possessed machines that cleaned and refined their own rice and that of neighbours, and they sold their surplus. Then rice imported from industrialised farms in other states became so cheap that small farmers stopped growing their own, and instead bought rice in the shops, and almost all the machines were left to moulder or were burned. In the shops, white and also parboiled rice is sold in small and big bags and in sacks, and is less than half the price of whole rice, which is sold at whopping premiums in small boxes in supermarkets and in 'health food' shops.

In Brazil in this last year the price of rice has increased by about 50%. But my family, organised in this case by father-in-law Haroldo, buys rice wholesale from a producer 80 km away outside the town of São João Neponceno. His machine cleans or also refines rice to order, and he then packs it in sacks and sends it as cargo by bus. Our wholegrain rice is cheaper per kilogram than supermarket white rice.

Suppose the price of rice continues to rise? In that case, rural communities whose land is still suitable will grow their own again, at first for their own consumption. At this stage a smart national or local government will offer interest-free loans to buy cleaning and refining machines, to be used co-operatively. In this way an increase in the price of staple food could in due course have the effect of re-creating a more rational agricultural system, with more use of people and less use of money.

Second tip: enjoy where you are. This means preferring what comes from near where you live – your own country, or better still, your locality. The result saves fuel, reduces emissions, and raises consciousness of the value of national and local resources. In Brazil, one of the best laws of the previous Fernando Henrique Cardoso presidency requires that at least 70% of the national annual budget for school meals, estimated at around \$US 500 million around the turn of the century, be spent on fresh vegetables, fruits and minimally processed foods, preferably sourced from local producers and co-operatives of farmers⁽¹²⁾. The system works: I have seen it in action in a 'favela' (slum) school in Rio de Janeiro, whose pupils help to unload the trucks, sometimes driven by uncles or cousins.

Another example is drink. When I first came to Brazil I persisted in drinking wine, but imported wine is expensive, and Brazilian wine is ho-hum to horrible. Instead I came to prefer beer, which has been brewed here often to original German formulations for over 150 years, and also the national liquor, the human biofuel 'cachaça', made from cane sugar. In the state of Minas Gerais many hundreds of brands of 'pinga' or 'aguardente', as it is also known, are produced labour-intensively by good old-fashioned methods using copper stills and seasoned wooden barrels. One of my favourite restaurants in Cabo Frio specialises in seafood soups and 'pinga' straight from the barrel. In the shops, bottles of the real stuff cost the

equivalent of around \$US 10 – the cost of a bottle of plonk – and upwards. Mass produced ‘cachaça’, of which around 1 billion litres were produced nationally in 2003, costs around \$US 5 in the shops, and some rougher brands cost less – less than twice the price of petrol, and a lot less than imported mineral water.

Here in front of me is a bottle of the industrially produced Ypióca ‘cachaça’. This is an old-established general brand, made 2000 km north of where I live, in Maranguape in the northern state of Ceará. In the shops here a litre costs around \$US 4.50. The version I have here is labelled *Orgânica*, and bears the seal of approval of the national Biodynamic Institute, being made out of sugar grown in dung and then fermented with natural yeasts. Its US importer is Preiss of Ramona, California, and some Googling informs me that varieties of basic Ypióca retail in the USA for around \$US 20, making a mark-up for transport, handling and profit of roughly 450%. A gastronomic website designed to boost the product avers that ‘at palate entry, the tastes of sweet charcoal and soot give a wake-up call’. My suggestion is that Californians stick to wine. Meanwhile this family supports our own local artisan farmers, producers and distillers. Saude! Cheers!

You may be thinking that it’s easier to ‘be the change’ if you live in a country in which family farmers and producer co-operatives can still make a living, and whose ways of life remain embedded in the family and community. True, it is. Farmers’ markets notwithstanding, life for most people in big cities, in countries where ‘lifestyles’ assume the supremacy of the individual, is, it seems to me, becoming more and more expensive, difficult and miserable. People whose careers do not depend on constant physical meetings are moving out of cities and working electronically. Wise moves are to houses with big gardens, in localities whose water is still plentiful and whose land supports networks of family farmers, growers and producers.

Jobs for the good ol’ boys and girls

Last month an editorial in this journal⁽¹³⁾ complained that appointments to top international jobs whose holders can and do influence public health one way or another, are made without clear process or – to use a more direct word – are a fix. Indeed they are. The most egregious such stitch-ups are the directorships of those UN agencies, notably the World Bank and UNICEF, and it seems also the World Food Programme (WFP), that are determined by the office of the US President.

The notion that once in post, directors of such agencies may act independently of US foreign policy, is of course laughable. They are political appointments, of people known to be good and faithful servants. Robert Zoellick, Ann Veneman and Josette Sheeran, currently the big bosses of the Bank, UNICEF and the WFP respectively, were previously all unelected officials holding senior,

even cabinet positions in the Bush II administration. As such, all pursued domestic or international food and other policies in the name of ‘free trade’ that actually enforce outrageously unfair terms of trade and thus the continued weakening, impoverishment and dependency of lower-income countries especially in Asia and Africa⁽¹⁴⁾.

Curiously, Josette Sheeran was a member of the Unification Church founded and controlled by the South Korean Sun Myung Moon (no relation to the UN secretary-general), from the mid 1970s to 1997 when she was managing editor of the Moonie organ, the daily newspaper the *Washington Times*^(15,16). Since then she is a declared Episcopalian. However, being a Moonie is not likely to be a disqualification for the job she now holds. The *Washington Times* has always supported right-wing Republicanism, and the Rev Moon’s organisation gives extremely generous personal support to leading right-wing Republicans, notably George Bush I, who since the mid-1990s has spoken up in praise of the work of the Rev Moon and his Universal Peace Federation, most recently at a meeting in May this year^(17,18).

Goodness! No, I am not suggesting that the Rev Moon influences current US policy. After all, everybody knows that the Bush family has business connections with the bin Laden family⁽¹⁹⁾, but nobody seriously suggests this has anything to do with the US government’s attitude to Al Queda, or its policies and actions since the attack on the USA. Well, almost nobody. We can all learn to be a bit sophisticated about such connections. It is safe to say though, that many of the world’s most powerful jobs, and not just those controlled by the US government, are not filled by people who have been screened and selected as a result of a transparent equal opportunities process.

Countries of the future

People ask me why being in Brazil is relevant to food and nutrition policy and practice. This column gives some reasons why. It also seems to me that being in the UK (or the USA, or Europe, or any high-income country) is a disadvantage. From an evolutionary and historical perspective, the industrial food systems originated in the UK and the USA are hardly any kind of model. Bread (white), biscuits, burgers, cakes, colas, confectionery, margarine, milk (cow’s), as common and even basic foods? Bizarre! True, such stuff is now also in the centre aisles of Brazilian supermarkets.

In the 21st century, I reckon that enlightenment is more likely to come from the South. In combination with China, India, South Africa and other non-aligned countries, Brazil is a country of the future – though true, people of European origin have been saying this of Brazil now for 508 years.

It’s also easy to enjoy food in Brazil. One of the pleasures of being here is that any vegetable or fruit I have never seen before, I see as does a young child. Here is the

jaboticaba, a fruit from the central 'cerrado' (savannah) region that looks like a super-size black cherry, with its own unique taste and texture, which grows out of the trunk of its tree. Here is the *caju* (cashew) fruit, with its sharp savour and slippery texture, its nut suspended from the bottom of the fruit. Here is *inhame*, a root vegetable that looks like a little brown armadillo, a type of yam, with its own sensory, culinary, nutritional and medicinal qualities.

Now I go downstairs to the kitchen and pick up a papaya, squeeze it to test for ripeness and cut it in half. Usually I discard papaya seeds, but this time notice how much they look like caviar, and spoon some up, crunch them and savour their peppery taste. Any one of these seeds could have become a tree. Then I come upstairs to my study with the two halves of the papaya on a plate and, subsiding from this mystical plane, devour the flesh of the fruit.

The tragedy of nutrition science as normally practised from the early 19th century to date is that it has specialised in the chemical, biochemical and medical aspects of what we eat and drink, all of which are important of course, while largely ignoring its cultural, culinary and sensual aspects. Indeed, separating the biological dimension of food and drink from its economic, social, political and environmental dimensions is also a mistake. This has limited nutrition as a science, and is now obviously unrealistic and increasingly unwise. It is best to think of food and drink as a whole, and also as part of a bigger picture – which it is. Crises are opportunities.

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well-chosen citations, are evidently being contributed by committed and public-spirited people of the highest calibre.

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