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Food joins energy in speculative global price spiral

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Food joins energy in speculative global price spiral

One socioeconomic triumph of the past century was a worldwide expansion of agricultural output that made the primal fear of starvation a fading memory for most human beings. A reversal of that remarkable success by pricing the modern cornucopia of foods beyond the reach of millions of poor people now threatens to become a dubious neoliberal achievement of the young 21st Century.

Despite unprecedented farming output and crop yields, the specter of mass hunger is back on the international news agenda. Reports of food riots in a dozen countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America have suddenly upstaged even the Western financial crisis and the warlike competition of powerful nation-states for control of energy and mineral resources. Prices of internationally traded grains have exploded. “Hundreds of thousands of people will face starvation” if this continues, predicted IMF President Dominique Strauss-Kahn, warning of grave political and economic consequences.

In Egypt, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Mauritania, Madagascar and the Philippines, soaring prices of food staples sparked spring riots, said the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). Workers unable to afford a decent meal battled police in Bangladesh last month, when spreading food riots also toppled the government of Haiti, Latin America’s poorest country.

A growing list of countries, including Egypt, China, Indonesia, Cambodia, Turkey and Vietnam, took quick steps to protect themselves by curbing rice exports. Russia, Ukraine, Argentina and Kazakhstan already restrict wheat exports. And in the European Union and the United States, where obesity is a weightier issue than hunger, authorities were suddenly confronted by foreign demands to curtail their massive, market-skewing programs to convert corn and soybean crops into subsidized motor fuels.

From an unaccustomed defensive crouch, Western politicians sought to deflect the blame for surging food prices from agrefuels and futures speculation to an array of less embarrassing factors affecting basic supply and demand. U.S. officials typically cite as the culprits historically low grain stocks, growing population, high energy prices, corruption or inflation in developing countries, rising meat consumption in India and China and bad weather, such as the drought that halved Australia’s 2006-07 wheat harvest.

A diet staple in many countries, wheat has indeed become 181% dearer. But rice, corn and soybeans have also been fetching record spring prices, especially in speculative forward trading on international commodity exchanges. A metric ton of benchmark Thai rice for export was quoted near \$1,000 the start of May. While gold rose by 37% and crude oil by 82% in the previous 12 months, the price of rice jumped by 122%. A simultaneous runup for wheat traded on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBoT) was 95%, according to the U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), while soybeans gained 83% and corn 66%. “Commodity prices across the board are at levels not experienced in many of our lifetimes,” CFTC Chairman Walter Lukken was quoted as saying.

Rising Food Prices: Policy Options and World Bank Response, a World Bank study, had already spotlighted an 83% elevation in the worldwide cost of foods in just three years, dashing its hopes for a rollback of poverty. An estimated 850 million people who still subsist far below the UN poverty level are the first to go hungry in food-price inflation. The cost of just

eating sops up as much as 60%-80% of an average person's income in some developing countries, compared with just 10%-20% in the world's industrialized societies.

Acknowledging a mixture of diverse contributing factors in the food-price crisis, Heiner Flassbeck, chief economist of UNCTAD in Geneva, described as "nonsense" the Western attempt to blame price-moving diet shifts associated with the growing prosperity of China and India. Separate studies show per capita yearly meat consumption in teeming China rising apace with incomes by about 1 kilogram a year from a current 45 kilograms. But this gradual gain is no cause for an abrupt grain-price spike. Yearly meat consumption in the United States, Germany and France has long been cruising comfortably at 70-80 kilograms. Moreover, worldwide food output has risen by an estimated 164% since 1961, easily outdistancing the 112% increase in the global population in the past half century.

Western biofuel subsidies also merit a reprieve because the price of rice, which is not distilled for fuel alcohol, has spiked along with other grains, Flassbeck told a *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper interviewer. The UNCTAD official focused the blame for the crisis principally on a wave of market speculation. Investors fleeing the U.S. subprime mortgage meltdown starting last summer have been turning to food and commodities in pursuit of easy gains. "Entire crops are sold off long before they even physically exist," he said.

A monetary phenomenon

Some of the most insightful discussion of the price phenomenon is coming nowadays from the developing world. "The global food crisis is a monetary phenomenon, an unintended consequence of America's attempt to inflate its way out of a market failure. There are long-term reasons for food prices to rise, but the unprecedented spike in grain prices during the past year stems from the weakness of the American dollar," columnist Spengler wrote in a recent article for *Asia Times*. "The link between the declining parity of the U.S. unit and the rising price of commodities, including oil as well as rice and other wares, is indisputable."

This article, titled *Rice, death and the dollar*, pointed out that hunger has never before posed a global threat in an era of plentiful harvests. Global rice production heads for a record 423 million metric tons in the 2007-08 growing year, enough to satisfy global demand. But the exaggerated impact of inventory stocking on thin rice exports, only 7% of the world's supply, causes the price to spike. "Because such a small proportion of the global rice supply trades, the monetary shock from the weak dollar was sufficient to more than double its price," it said.

An analysis from GRAIN, an international non-profit organization, also dismissed talk of a food shortage or a price anomaly, calling the price runup the result of decades of neoliberal globalization. The amount of speculative money in commodities futures ballooned last year to around \$175 billion from less than \$5 billion in 2000, according to estimates it cited. It also quoted estimates that at least half of the wheat still available for export on the big commodity markets is now controlled by investment funds. Food markets may then serve as instruments of financial leveraging strategies.

Normal supply and demand factors related to farming would have certainly prevented the current crisis if modern grain markets were designed to deliver foodstuffs from growers to consumers at a market-clearing price. After all, the worldwide grain harvest was up by 4% in 2007. And global cereal output has nearly tripled since 1961, though population has only doubled. But rising dependency for food supplies upon international import-export markets in lieu of self-sufficient domestic production has encouraged the decline of food stocks to the

lowest level in 30 years. It has also attracted forward betting, making food derivatives a new speculative asset class for financial high-rollers.

Concludes GRAIN: “We are in a structural meltdown, the direct result of three decades of neoliberal globalization.” Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez drew a similar conclusion. He called the food price inflation a “massacre of the world's poor” that has more to do with a crisis of capitalism than the production of food. The systematic economic demolition of tiny Haiti – culminating in the fall of the government of President Rene Preval and Prime Minister Jacques-Édouard Alexis as a result of the April food riots in UN-occupied Port-au-Prince – illustrates a neoliberal experiment that has been duplicated in many poor countries.

Thirty years ago, as Western financial strategists were perfecting the recycling petrodollars to sovereign Third World borrowers through London and Wall Street, Haiti was able to feed itself. Today, 84% of its rice must be imported. Moreover, 65% of Haiti's government financing comes from international agencies, the country must pay nearly \$80 million a year to serve its \$1.4 billion foreign debt and the gross domestic product per capita has shrunk by 38.3% since 1980, according to a *Counterpunch* magazine report quoting Vassar College expert Mark Schuller.

Haitian rice production has now been replaced by cheaper, subsidized shipments from the United States and other surplus producers. The measures which accomplished this feat – mainly trade liberalization and sectoral privatization – also strangled the country's cotton and sugar exports. Those measures were dictated by foreign lenders with the backing of Western-dominated international institutions, namely the IMF and World Bank, and more recently the World Trade Organization, with the support of international agribusiness.

Conditions attached to U.S. food aid which became necessary in the 1990s required Haiti to lower its tariffs and open its markets to U.S. food exports. Preval was only recently elected president in the aftermath of the latest foreign military intervention that toppled an elected government. But he merely served as a well-meaning dupe of a powerful clique of wealthy families that had learned to work an international system that has the country in its grip. In addition to the ruined small farmers who have been driven into urban slums, the losers in this failed Caribbean state have been the sectors of health, education and domestic business.

The United States remains the world's No. 1 donor of food aid, but has cut back in recent years. Amid the April crisis reports, however, U.S. President Bush earmarked \$200 million in emergency food aid. Bilateral aid arrangements with strings attached have had documented perverse effects in the past. They have been roundly criticized as veiled dumping or market-opening schemes. Having tracked the food aid issue, Oxfam experts recommend in a white paper that all such aid henceforth be rendered as transparent grants.

Agrofuels: subsidized marriage of food to oil

Now that international food prices appear to be tracking the soaring price of crude oil, the market role of agrofuels has come under heavy diplomatic fire. U.S. farming lobbyists like to scoff at complaints from rice-eating Asians about what Americans do with corn or soybeans. But developing countries place major blame for the sudden food inflation on the expanding agrofuel subsidy programs of the EU and the United States.

Turkish Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek called the conversion of food to motor fuels “appalling.” Indian Finance Minister P. Chidambaram saw no justification for a policy of diverting food crops to agrofuel output in a world vexed by hunger and poverty. “Converting food into fuel is good policy for neither the poor nor the environment,” he said at April's Washing-

ton meeting of the IMF and World Bank 12-13. There, South African Finance Minister Trevor Manuel scolded as “criminal” those wealthy countries which subsidize farmers to produce cereals for fuel rather than for food. Poor Africans might have to return to traditional subsistence farming in self-defense, he said. Delegates to New Delhi’s India-Africa summit the start of April called on the Western world to stop creating shortages and driving up food prices in poor countries by diverting foodstuffs to run motor vehicles.

Even Germany’s minister for foreign development aid said during her IMF sojourn that the Western agrofuel programs and their government subsidies ought to be reconsidered. And the office of Mariann Fischer Boel, the EU agricultural commissioner, said the €90 million a year in EU incentives paid to growers of plants used as energy sources should be stopped. But she was careful to reject the accusations that energy crops were crowding out food crops.

Nevertheless, the Western biofuel craze has been linked to just such perverse crop substitution at home and abroad. An example comes from Malaysia and Indonesia, which together grow 85% of the world’s crude palm oil. There, forests are being cleared and burned to grow oil palms, sugar cane and jatropha for biofuels destined for European markets. That lifts the price of palm oil for the poor of Southeast Asia, once the smoke clears over the new agrofuel monoculture.

A similar agrofuel price effect, which hiked the price of tortillas, had already sparked unrest last year among poor people in Mexico. Blame has been laid to the U.S demand for corn to make subsidized motor fuel. Some Mexican cropland has also been converted to corn from the agave distilled to make Mexico’s tequila whisky.

In response to the added demand from distillers of subsidized fuel alcohol, some U.S. farmers have been switching to corn from soybeans and wheat. But the artificial demand for field corn also raises the prices of this vital livestock feed, rippling through to the prices of meat, milk and eggs.

Agrofuel market distortions

The United States grew 42% of the world’s corn in 2006. It is the world’s main exporter of this key grain, used throughout the world mostly to feed livestock. Its 2006 harvest of 282.3 million metric tons (11.1 billion bushels) easily eclipsed the No. 2 grower, China, which harvested 139.4 million metric tons (5.5 billion bushels). Brazil, EU countries, Mexico, Argentina and India were marginal players with corn output ranging from 42 million to 15 million metric tons. Therefore, any diversion of U.S. corn available for export strongly impacts the international grain market.

U.S. corn exports should have slightly declined to 19% of the crop last year. But spring planting projections had also indicated a 13% leap in corn acreage. As much as 27% of the 2007 crop might have been earmarked for conversion to fuel alcohol. About 20% of U.S. corn output went into motor ethanol in 2006, up from 6% in 2000, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data. Last year’s subsidy for U.S. ethanol production approached \$1.40 a gallon. And the U.S. Congress has decreed a five-fold increase in agrofuel output. An energy law enacted last year requires 9 billion gallons of agrofuel to be mixed into the gasoline supply in 2008, up from less than 3 billion gallons in 2000.

U.S. motor-fuel ethanol distilled as a gasoline substitute is made mostly from corn, already a heavily subsidized crop. The public subsidies for U.S. agrofuels are linked by policy to the alcohol production and have been estimated to be costing in the range of \$7 billion a year. This subsidized corn ethanol competes directly with a Brazilian ethanol, which is produced much

more efficiently from sugar cane. But a U.S. protective tariff wall has been erected against this Latin product. At his news briefing during the IMF-World Bank meeting, even former U.S. Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick, the new World Bank boss, praised sugar-based ethanol and questioned whether tariffs to block this fuel make economic sense. Zoellick also acknowledged, among other factors, the agrofuel link to the rise in global food prices.

Even the EU, which has rarely encountered a subsidy it doesn't like, may have seen too much of the U.S. agrofuel juggernaut. "The European biodiesel industry is being threatened by a flood of subsidized U.S. biodiesel," John Bruton, the EU ambassador to Washington, said last January. He called for an end to such market distortion: "What we are witnessing here is U.S. taxpayers effectively subsidizing European motorists to the tune of around \$300 million last year, and that figure is set to be even higher this year – all while Americans themselves are suffering at the pump."

Prompting this outburst was one of the strangest market distortions yet spawned by the EU and U.S. agrofuel offensive—a scam dubbed "splash and dash." Traders of EU soybean biofuel produced as a diesel substitute have been busily shuttling their product across the Atlantic to take advantage of a U.S. export incentive for this particular fuel. Their product is blended at U.S. ports with a drop of normal middle distillate to qualify for the U.S. subsidy. Then it is shipped back to the European market.

The U.S. export subsidy for agrodiesel blended with real diesel comes to \$1 a gallon (\$0.26/liter). The European Biodiesel Board (EBB) said this bilateral trade has swept up 15%-20% of EU biodiesel sales and accounts for three-fifths of all U.S. agrodiesel output, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. As a dumping product, it undercuts EU distillers, who pay more for their raw materials. Splash and dash has ignited demands for countervailing EU duties to protect the subsidized EU biodiesel sector, or maybe a WTO complaint.

Belated biofuel backlash

But of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) fears U.S. agrofuel subsidies will only grow because they are tied to output that is rising at double-digit percentage rates. IISD's Global Subsidies Initiative, which opposes agrofuel subsidies, had already estimated such U.S. incentives at \$5.5 billion-\$7.3 billion a year in a study begun in late 2006. As in the EU, the U.S. taxpayer largesse for agrofuel is lavishly promoted as a gain for the environment, for energy security and for rural development. Imaginative horror scenarios of global warming and "peak oil" help rally media consumers to the noble cause.

An ambitious target of 10% agrofuel use in transportation by 2010 has been set by the EU, which already devotes nearly half its budget to entrenched agricultural subsidies. But the scientific committee of the European Environment Agency (EEA) in April called for this target to be set aside, pending a fresh study of the environmental risks and benefits. It questioned the ratio of committed resources to promised gains in energy conservation. An internal paper of the EU Commission said the target could cost European taxpayers €65 billion in the period 2007-2020, an estimate attributed to the EC's Joint Research Center (JRC). JRC fears that deforestation and use of nitrogen fertilizers to make agrofuels could offset any promised carbon-dioxide reduction. And public money to fill a strategic oil reserve could be less than that poured into biofuels yielding less energy.

Energized by the unfavorable publicity surrounding the food-price crisis, the EU Commission has begun to talk about doing away with its subsidies for distilling motor fuels from farm crops. Citing excessive planting, it had quietly trimmed its farm subsidy for growing energy

crops already last year. But meaningful change would take a bruising political brawl, now that the biofuel bandwagon has gathered momentum, made political connections and tasted real money. Half a century of experience has shown how such powerful constituencies plugged into entrenched EU agricultural programs have managed to ward off serious reform.

Nevertheless, the whole notion of agrofuels as a challenge to petroleum would have remained a weak joke if Western policy were guided by either science or economics. It would take 320 million hectares of cropland to grow the biomass required to replace just 10% of worldwide oil consumption today, an agrochemical industry estimate shows. With a projected increase in world population to 8 billion by 2030, this unthinkable land grab would then rise to 450 million hectares – 30% of all of the world's available cropland. Yet the ratio of suitable fertile cropland to the number of human being is steadily diminishing. And a new revolution in farming productivity is not on the horizon.

“There is just no energy benefit to using plant biomass for liquid fuel. These strategies are not sustainable,” said David Pimentel, professor of ecology and agriculture at Cornell University. With Berkeley professor Tad W. Patzek, he has published energy input-output ratios derived from extensive research on ethyl alcohol from corn, switchgrass and wood as well as on biodiesel from soybeans and sunflower plants. Corn requires 29% more fossil energy than the fuel it produces, switchgrass 45% more, wood 57%. Soybean fuel takes 27% more fossil energy to make than it yields, sunflowers 118% more. Their energy inputs considered fertilizer and crop chemicals, farm machinery and irrigation, grinding and transport, fermenting and distilling. Taxpayer largesse and costs of pollution and environmental degradation weren't included.

A year-old UN report called “Sustainable Energy: A Framework for Decisionmakers” had already warned of the harm that land reallocation and crop substitution for expanding biofuel programs could do to the poor and the food supply. “Use of large-scale mono-cropping could lead to significant biodiversity loss, soil erosion, and nutrient leaching. Even varied crops could have negative impacts if they replace wild forests or grasslands,” it said.

This folly can be measured in yet another way. Nearly one-third of the American corn crop may be commandeered this year to make the ethanol fuel equivalent of less than 3% of U.S. oil consumption. But by 2012 the agrofuel distillers are on track to collect for their effort \$93 billion in subsidies, or 65% of the product's market value, according to numbers attributed to Thomas Tanton of San Francisco's Pacific Research Institute.

“Subsidized corn ethanol gets the first prize for policy madness,” consumer advocate Ralph Nader, a U.S. presidential candidate, wrote in a recent newspaper essay. “It not only damages the environment, soaks up the water from mid-West aquifers, scuttles set-asides for soil conservation, but its net energy equation qualifies for collective insanity on Capitol Hill.” Lester Brown, founder of the environmentally impeccable Earth Policy Institute in Washington, estimates that one person could be fed for a year on the amount of grain needed to fill with bioethanol the 25-gallon fuel tank of one sport-utility vehicle (SUV). Even Gregory Page, chief executive of Cargill, a huge agrofuel distiller as well as a seed vendor and food processor, is also concerned. “The big risk is that we are sowing the seeds of unintended consequences,” Page was quoted as saying in a *Financial Times* report on agrofuels a year ago.

Defensive decoupling from dollar dealings

Could subsidized agrofuel programs, rampant commodity speculation, neoliberal financial engineering or predatory market-rigging schemes have unintended consequences? They might if they accelerate the unraveling of the international financial architecture that makes them so attractive. Without the institution of dollar-priced international trading of essential energy and foodstuffs, crass market abuses would only boomerang on the countries that spawned them. But the runup in world grain prices, coupled with a Western debt crisis and a devaluing fiat dollar, is forcing some poor countries to draw protectionist consequences that are incompatible with globalization.

A World Bank survey of 58 countries found that at least a dozen countries have reduced food import tariffs while curbing food exports in order to lower local food prices and become more self-sufficient. Eighteen surveyed countries are also boosting consumer subsidies and imposing price controls. These are precisely the old-fashioned trade obstacles against which U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson sternly warned during the April IMF-World Bank meeting. But they now look like a logical response to an apparent market failure.

Sovereign wealth funds, fed by some of the \$6 trillion in dollar-denominated debt and paper assets held by foreign central banks, are also beginning to diversify into real assets that hedge against currency fluctuations. Funds launched by China, Russia, Norway and an assortment of small Southeast Asian countries and Near Eastern oil producers with large surpluses have yet to make a dramatic move. But the systemic implications seem as important as any threatened shift of important oil producers away from dollar pricing.

Bilateral, quasi-barter deals swapping food for energy or development aid for resources are also gaining popularity. China signed such a trade deal with food-exporter New Zealand. Libya and Ukraine made a pact swapping energy and food. India and China have quietly stitched up numerous bilateral exchanges with resource and energy-rich countries of Africa and Central Asia. Oil-rich Venezuela has extended similar reciprocity to Latin neighbors. This challenges neoliberal visions of efficient international commodity trading that can be neatly settled in dollars on exchanges in New York, Chicago or London.

Interconnected financial markets have apparently forged a dangerous link between grocery bills and volatile oil prices. If gasoline becomes unaffordable, one can still ride a bicycle or walk to work. When a predatory house mortgage loan can no longer be paid, an evicted family can still find a cheap apartment. There is no such substitute for eating. If farm output can be monetized like subprime mortgages or the myriad other things upon which derivative are written, food could become too valuable to put on a plate.

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