



Ethics and the Global Food Crisis

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Recently Costco started limiting the number of 20-pound bags of rice customers can buy—to four, in case you’re wondering. Worried about rising prices and limited supply, consumers are buying up large quantities of rice. However, there isn’t really a rice shortage in the US: according to the Department of Agriculture projections, the amount of rice produced this year will be about the same as last year.

One reason for the increase in demand is that people are responding to news stories from places like Mexico and Pakistan about violent protests against rising prices and food shortages. In many countries there is a rapidly spreading food crisis, and like escalating energy costs, the problem of rising food prices is not likely to go away. The current global food crisis alerts us to many ethical concerns, and I’d like to briefly discuss two of them.

First, odd as it sounds, this crisis focuses attention on our moral responsibility to think about agriculture. Abundant food at low prices has been a fact of life in the US over the last few decades. Americans, on average, spend only about 10% of their disposable income on food—that’s about half of what people spent just 50 years ago. Furthermore, only 2% of Americans still make their living farming. As a consequence, most people no longer think much about agriculture. As Aldo Leopold remarked, “there are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.” His point is that there’s a moral danger in taking agriculture for granted.

Adequate and nutritious food is essential for humans to live a healthy, good life, and few things humans do have more impact on the planet than growing food. Given this, world agriculture faces tremendous challenges. The earth’s population is expected to grow by 2 to 3 billion people by mid-century. This is happening at the same time that the negative environmental impacts of modern industrial agriculture are being fully realized. We will need to meet the challenge of feeding many more people, on roughly the same amount of land, in a more sustainable way.

The second issue involves the nature and extent of the moral obligations of wealthy countries to help poor countries feed their growing populations. In Montana, some people go without food because they cannot afford it. When one looks at the global level, this same problem grows exponentially in magnitude and severity. The current global food crisis in developing countries is a foreshadowing of harsher things to come. Billions of people around the world spend most of their income on food and live on a slim margin for survival. The recent rise in the price of food staples hits these people hard and can push many towards starvation. This also creates social unrest. Again, the ethical question here is about the nature and extent of aid that wealthy countries should provide.

On the international level people have been wrestling with these questions for some time. Usually this revolves around the notion of achieving “food security” for all people. The United Nations 1996 World Food Summit defined “food security” as follows: “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their daily needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Universal food security seems like an impossible goal, but nonetheless, is it a goal we should try to achieve, to the best of our abilities? Does every person have the “right” to food security? And does the world community have the duty to ensure that all people are food secure?

Most agree with the maxim that we should treat people like we would like to be treated. None of us wants to go hungry. However, simply responding to food crises by sending food won’t actually help us achieve universal food security. Food security implies that a country can grow much of its own food in a sustainable way, and that its people can afford to buy their own food. Given this, pursuing food security will clearly require long-term, coordinated international planning and effort. It will also involve a whole range of issues, including population growth, sustainability, agricultural subsidies, global climate change, biofuels and scientific research and technology.

The current global food crisis is not going away: instead, it is likely to grow in severity. And while the recent limit on bags of rice at Costco doesn’t point to a real problem in Montana, perhaps it will motivate us to consider our moral responsibilities to think about agriculture and to help others around the world achieve food security.