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FIGHTING THE FOOD CRISIS WITH SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

*Paul Lagasse
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Skyrocketing food prices are threatening to topple at least 100 million people worldwide into chronic hunger, a crisis that Josette Sheeran, the Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has termed the “silent tsunami.” According to Global Impact charity **Plan USA**, that tsunami consumes more than 10 million lives a year—more than the number who die from tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS *combined*.

In many developing countries food purchases already account for up to 80 percent of poor people’s incomes, says Matthew Emry, senior program officer at Global Impact charity **American Jewish World Service (AJWS)**. And when food costs more than what people earn, they have to sell off their farm equipment and their land. They may also have to take their children out of school to work or because they can no longer afford the fees, send them away to relatives or orphanages, or even force them into early marriages or into labor or sexual slavery.

Riots protesting high food prices and low food availability have been reported in 34 countries, including Haiti, Egypt and Somalia. WFP reports that at least 30 more countries will have difficulties feeding their citizens. Shortages could trigger national or even regional destabilization. And the WFP predicts that prices will remain high until at least 2020.

What Is Causing the Crisis?



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“Much of the current food price crisis is a result of inequalities in economic, political and social policies,” says Emry. Other contributing factors include:

- Reduction of arable land through urbanization
- Droughts and poor harvests resulting from climate change
- High transportation and storage costs associated with global crop exports
- Increasing use of food crops for biofuels

The global food crisis is also directly affecting development efforts. Food security is a cornerstone of humanitarian aid, but as prices rise, aid organizations have to pay more to purchase the same quantities of food, while at the same time the number of people needing food aid is increasing daily.



Stephanie Tombari/CRWRC

Members of a CRWRC food security program check their crop's progress.

“This is a crucial time for agriculture as a poverty alleviation tool,” says Jacob Kramer, international relief director for Global Impact charity **Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC)**. “But we must understand that before production has readjusted itself to the new reality, there will be a lot more suffering for people already living on the edge.”

Sustainable Agriculture is Smart Agriculture

Global Impact charities are showing the world's farmers how a variety of relatively simple and earth-friendly techniques can help them build a robust shelter against the silent tsunami. Such techniques include growing and selling locally, planting crops that increase nitrogen in the soil, rotating crops, stockpiling reserves, using composted material instead of artificial fertilizers and growing healthier and hardier crops.



CRWRC

A CRWRC food security program participant points out the plants that are flourishing in her garden.

For example, since 2003 Phil and Christa Grabowski of CRWRC have been helping farmers in the southeast African nation of Malawi to develop and implement sustainable agricultural techniques.

“When I talk to people, I don't use the words 'sustainable agriculture,’” Phil Grabowski says. “It's just smart agriculture. It's about doing the best you can with what you have.” He has seen how these simple techniques have helped this largely agricultural country remain relatively stable while neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe and Tanzania suffer convulsions from food shortages.

“I'm encouraged because they're building their capacity to feed themselves,” Grabowski says. Because Malawi has only one harvest per year, the baseline measure is whether Malawian farmers can grow enough to feed their families for eight months of the year. Using sustainable agricultural methods, many farmers have been able to go from an average six months' reserve to nine months—while also improving nutrient yields and food group variety.

“We're seeing progress, but we're not there on average,” Grabowski concludes. “There's no reason that people should be hungry. There are enough resources to feed the world.”

Member Charities Engaged in Sustainable Agriculture

Many Global Impact charities have programs that include sustainable agriculture as an

essential component of their food aid programs:

- **Plan USA** provides emergency food relief in crisis situations and teaches sustainable and efficient farm practices so that communities can develop, grow and ultimately support themselves.
- Food and economic security are integral to **American Jewish World Service (AJWS)** community development and rights grants. AJWS helps grant recipient agencies develop programs that support improved agricultural practices and provide increased access to needed resources. AJWS also supports numerous advocacy efforts aimed at protecting local communities' rights. In addition, AJWS grants help provide for the food needs of at-risk communities.
- As part of its relief and development activities around the world, **Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC)** works closely with partner organizations to train farmers about new crops and techniques such as crop diversification, organic farming and other agricultural and income-generation programs.
- Through its Sustainable Agriculture and Development Program **United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)** works with subsistence farmers and their communities in Liberia, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique and Sierra Leone to use natural fertilizers and grow plants with high nutrient value. The program also trains beekeepers to harvest honey for food and medicine, as well as for use in the manufacture of textiles and glue. UMCOR trains farmers to serve as community resources on sustainable farming and beekeeping techniques, to help others replicate their successes.
- Through its Agriculture and Natural Resources Program, **CARE** helps farmers increase their productivity in environmentally sustainable ways. In Africa, CARE is providing food and water to millions affected by a multiyear drought in Somalia and Kenya and delivering livestock feed to pastoral herders.
- With the help of partner organizations in 80 countries, **Church World Service (CWS)** focuses on antipoverty work at the household level. In Haiti CWS helped launch a sustainable agriculture program in 2005 following Tropical Storm Jeanne. The program operates as a transition from disaster recovery to sustainable community development. Residents in the remote Artibonite and Northwest regions have formed 12 agricultural community cooperatives and receive training, tools, livestock, poultry and seeds. CWS is also trying to bring more farming tools, seeds and compost into Pakistan and Afghanistan to help alleviate stresses that could degenerate into political instability.
- **Mercy Corps** provides seeds, tools—and most important, knowledge—to train villagers in developing countries in organic farming methods. These budding farmers start their home gardens on community land, bringing in income and helping to regenerate the soil using organic farming methods. Through its new Action Center to End World Hunger Mercy Corps uses interactive technologies to demonstrate how one person can help end poverty and hunger.
- **Oxfam America's** emergency relief efforts incorporate food security through purchase and distribution of locally grown food and cash/voucher handouts where needed. Its advocacy on climate change, agriculture and trade rules hold governments accountable for establishing and enforcing preventative measures and social protection programs and help protect the human rights of people suffering from food shortages to ensure that they get needed access to food, water and services.
- **Save the Children** is working to meet both immediate needs and build long-term sustainability. Immediate emergencies are met with supplies of high-nutrient foods and food vouchers, while longer-term programs address underlying causes and

expand local capacity.

- **World Relief** works through its local church partners to reach communities at risk from chronic food shortages to supply staple foods such as rice and beans and to provide hot meals to young children. Agricultural programs train farmers to make better use of their land to grow more, and more nutritious, food.
- In addition to short-term food aid, **World Vision** helps communities increase production by encouraging crop diversification and sustainable agriculture methods, so they can produce as much of their food locally as possible.

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