



The *Avoidable* **FOOD CRISIS**

- *A symptom of larger problems with our food system.*
- *Avoidable, if we focus on systems that feed us, reduce climate change, build resilience, and value farmers.*
- *Is getting worse...unless we tackle it together!*

Volume 1 • November 2011

What is the Food Crisis?

Canadians are waking up to a global food crisis that has been growing for decades. In early 2011, as the number of the world's hungry and malnourished reached a billion, the UN reported world food prices had hit another all-time high. We saw food riots and political unrest erupt again, just as it had in 2008 when people were forced onto streets to demand the right to feed their children.

In some of the world's most vulnerable countries, people are spending up to 80% of household income on food. Too many people do not have access to food, land, and resources. With hunger, comes social and political instability.

Why is this happening?

The food crisis is not a scarcity problem; it's an access and distribution problem, fundamentally linked to the way our food is produced. Simply put, our global food system is unfair and no longer works. It needs a dramatic transformation.

How we grow our food matters.

We must rebuild our food system so it:

- **Feeds people first**
- **Nurtures diversity**
- **Respects the environment**
- **Is resilient to shocks**
- **Responds to climate change**

“Any system that produces enough food for the entire world and yet fails to feed one in seven people, which is subject to rampant speculation and land-grabbing, and where crops and land that could be used to feed people are instead turned into fuel for Hummers, is patently not working.”

**- Editorial, *The Guardian*,
June 2011**

This **Food Crisis Primer** is an introduction to the issues and solutions that are **ready and waiting for action.**

Why is there a GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS?

Key Issues

FOOD AS A MARKET COMMODITY

- In converting food crops to commodities for mass markets, we've lost an important relationship between farmers and eaters, and between people and the land.
- When food is simply a commodity, production is open to market speculation that drives up prices, profiting speculators in times of scarcity.

UNIFORMITY

- Mass uniformity is a cost-reducing strategy with the primary goal of **maximum** production, too often at the expense of **optimum** production.
- In our one-size-fits-all global food system, a few major crops [rice, wheat, corn] dominate, ignoring the many valuable, nutrition-rich crops - like beans, pulses, and quinoa - needed for healthy, balanced diets.
- Our homogenized system promotes dependency on expensive packages of industrial seeds and synthetic chemicals, which undermine the biodiversity crucial to sustainable food production and food security.
- The dominance and control of select global corporations is driving diverse, mid-size and small farmers out of the agricultural system all over the world. In Canada 2000-2005, the average net annual income per farmer was actually **a loss** of \$7,000. (Source: National Farmers Union, 2006)

The Irish Potato Famine (1845-52) resulted in about a million deaths among people whose staple diet was the potato. The country grew only two potato varieties, and neither was able to resist the blight that destroyed crops in successive years.

ENERGY CONSUMPTION

- The current global agricultural model is deeply dependent on consumption of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are used in everything from the production and use of large-scale agricultural machinery, fertilizers, food processing, packaging, and the global transportation of food.
- Around the world agricultural land is increasingly being used to grow crops for fuels instead of food.
- 20th century agriculture models depend on the diversion of large amounts of valuable freshwater supplies.



Many complex and interconnected practices have forged deep cracks in the global food system. At the heart of this ongoing crisis is an approach to agriculture dependent on technological and short-term solutions, as well as a narrow interpretation of innovation. We need new thinking, not only because of the tragic costs to human life and global ecosystems, but because hungry and vulnerable people are the least responsible. **The food crisis is avoidable.**

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE

- For every rise of one degree in the average global temperature, we lose about 10% of the world's food production. (Source: Dyer, 2010)
- The current agricultural system produces up to 33% of the world's greenhouse gasses, which contribute to climate extremes such as drought and floods that destroy land, soils, and crops.

TRADE

- International trade practices and unfair subsidies often undercut local, diverse, small producers and local markets that can best respond to changing conditions and needs.
- In Ghana, it's cheaper to buy a bag of frozen chicken parts from Europe than fresh chicken from home.

LAND GRABS

- Worldwide, investors are buying up agricultural land, betting on future profits when food and land are scarce, and prices skyrocket.
- Governments are also purchasing large tracts of foreign land, concerned about their ability to grow enough food and fuel for their populations.
- Since 2006, investors have negotiated control of farmland equal to the total arable land surface of France. (Source: De Schutter, 2010)



CORN THE COMMODITY KING

A major world crop, corn is no longer just a simple food staple

- Today, more corn is produced for animal feed in the US than for human consumption.
- Corn is the new fuel in a time of depleting oil, taking up valuable farmland. In the US, 40% of corn production is now directed to the production of ethanol fuel. (Source USDA 2011)
- Corn is a core ingredient of the highly processed food products of the western world. In everything from ice cream to tomato sauce, whenever you see sucrose or glucose on the label – that's corn.



What Can We Do About It?

RE-LOCALIZE Food Production

Restore a more direct relationship between farmers who produce food and the people and communities who eat it. Strong local food production creates a greater potential diversity in both food crops and varieties, and increases vitality in local markets and economies. It creates more options, choices and control over access to food.

RE-INVEST in Agricultural Biodiversity

Diversity in food crops - and varieties within those food crops - is the key to resilient food systems. Biodiversity is nature's remarkable backup plan in case of disasters such as climate extremes, pests, and disease. The tragic effects of the Irish potato famine could have been avoided with agricultural biodiversity.

Seed saving and innovation is the root of agricultural biodiversity. Farmers' seeds work with nature to adapt to changing conditions with each growing season.

REDUCE Energy Consumption

Make sure food is produced and consumed closer to home to diminish the environmental cost of transporting food.

Use natural systems and materials - such as local composting instead of petrochemical fertilizers - to reduce energy consumption.

REVITALIZE Natural Resources & Ecosystems

Farms that practice ecological agriculture are highly productive. They integrate sustainable farming practices and use energy from natural materials that can be generated on site in a circular economy, patterned on nature.

Ecological agriculture is also a grossly overlooked climate change mitigation strategy. Healthy soils are a natural sink, drawing carbon from the air and returning it to the land, reducing the need for external fertilizers.

REMIND our Politicians

We need to support policies at home and internationally to:

- **Conserve and Protect** biodiversity.
- **Invest** in ecological agriculture.
- **Halt** land grabbing and the expanded use of agricultural land to grow fuel crops.
- **Promote** food sovereignty
- **Safeguard** the rights of farmers.

LEARN MORE. Find food-crisis resources at usc-canada.org/food-crisis



USC Canada was founded as the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada by Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova in 1945.

Our award-winning *Seeds of Survival* program promotes vibrant family farms, strong rural communities, and healthy ecosystems around the world.

www.usc-canada.org/food-crisis