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HOW TO EASE THE SQUEEZE ON FOOD ACCESS

Rich nations must act to ensure supply, experts say.

By [Mark Trumbull](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor
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Surging food prices present an enormous long-term challenge for the world, but practical steps to address the challenge are within reach here and now.

That's the message from farming and food-policy experts at a time when hunger and the high cost of grains have become a source of political tension worldwide.

Although poor nations are most at risk, much can be done by rich nations to avert a crisis and to set the stage for long-run solutions.

Some of the steps – such as boosting food aid – are obvious. Others are more difficult or politically controversial, but could reap meaningful benefits. Some examples:

- Ramp up cash-handout programs for people who spend half or more of their income on food.
- Curb or phase out government mandates or subsidies for using crops as fuel.
- Expand agricultural research and spread existing technologies throughout Africa, where farmers lag furthest behind.
- Prepare International Monetary Fund assistance to help food-poor nations cover rising trade deficits.
- Resist the temptation to tamper with the free-market price signals that will ultimately encourage greater food production. This means resisting price controls or farm subsidies within nations, and keeping trade open among nations.

"Cash transfers ... will make the difference between life and death for many," says Peter Hazell, a farming expert at Imperial College in London. Advanced nations, he says, should "slow down, particularly on the [biofuel] mandates, and invest heavily in agricultural development."

The current problem is not a shortage of food but rather prices that are soaring too fast, especially for the 2 billion people with incomes of about \$2 per day or less.

But that problem – serious enough to spark riots in some African nations and the toppling of a government in Haiti – hints at a longer-run challenge. With world population rising, nations need to produce a lot more food, and they must do so while addressing environmental concerns from greenhouse-gas emissions to water supplies.

But for all the challenges, humanity has historically found answers.

"We always seem to manage," says Leonard Guarraia of the World Agricultural Forum in St. Louis. Yet "we've got some challenges ahead of us that we've never had before."

The stakes involve more than humanitarian relief.

"This is also a national security issue," says Andrew Natsios, a former director of the US Agency for International Development who teaches at Georgetown University in Washington. He points to the prospect that more governments could fall due to food-related civil unrest.

Some immediate steps he recommends include one President Bush supports: allowing one-fourth of America's Food for Peace budget to go toward buying food close to where it's used, so less is spent on shipping.

Moreover, because advanced nations' biofuels programs have helped to push up food prices, those programs should be eliminated, Mr. Natsios suggests. A gradual phaseout might be the most politically palatable way to do this, he says.

This has become a matter of hot debate, but other food experts agree.

"Don't burn food," says Dennis Avery of the Hudson Institute.

Imperial College's Mr. Hazell says that, at a minimum, \$1 should be spent on agricultural development in needy places such as Africa for every \$1 spent on biofuels.

High food prices, coupled with efforts to spread existing technologies worldwide, could increase harvests fairly quickly.

"Africa has tremendous potential" and could even become a food exporter, perhaps freeing up land elsewhere for bio-fuels, Hazell says.

But to get there requires investments in farm practices – and simple infrastructure like roads – that many African nations are hard-pressed to make on their own.

Christopher Barrett, a Cornell University development expert, says such productivity improvements – and not just food relief – must come soon, since "this is not a brief storm that will pass."

He also says that freer markets will foster the most efficient production and help farmers in poor countries. "Get rid of the crazy trade barriers and domestic agricultural-protection schemes," he says.

In today's climate of crisis, some nations have curbed exports to reserve grains for their own people. The motive is not hard to grasp, but economists recommend avoiding such policies. Better, they say, is to target cash and food to the needy but to generally let farmers respond to rising prices by producing more.

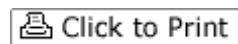
Eventually, a range of steps may slow the pace of food inflation that has become a source of consumer anxiety even in well-off nations such as the US.

For now, though, high prices mean that food aid is hit with a "double whammy," says Bill O'Keefe of Catholic Relief Services in Baltimore. Demand for food assistance is rising, even as relief groups must spend more on each bag of grain. Rising oil prices, meanwhile, add to costs for transporting food.

That's why World Bank President Robert Zoellick recently called on governments to send the UN World Food Program \$500 million by May 1. Mr. Bush quickly stepped up by releasing an extra \$200 million from an emergency fund.

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