



The world's food security is at the mercy of global policy elites - a situation that must change, argues **TOM LINES**.

In 1943 President Roosevelt called an international conference which recommended setting up a permanent body 'to deal with the varied problems of food and agriculture, not in isolation, but together.' The conference observed that those foods which improve people's diets and health are generally produced by farming methods which maintain soil productivity and ensure reliable returns for farmers: 'In short, better nutrition means better farming.'<sup>1</sup> Policies for food and agriculture have to go hand-in-hand.

After the Second World War the permanent body was duly created as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). But large parts of the world have faced hunger and food insecurity ever since that time. Has the integrated food policy suggested above ever existed in poor places which are threatened by these scourges? Yes, in certain countries such as India and China, and sometimes over long periods. However, it is debatable whether it has existed at all in most countries or globally.

Plenty of policies have touched on food, some of them overlapping, others contradicting each other. The FAO and its associate, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, have made valiant efforts to promote food policies, but their influence was always weaker than other currents. Meanwhile, there has been a kaleidoscope of changing fashions in thinking on agricultural development.

What stands out over many decades is the number and diversity of global players determining agricultural policies, and the confusion between them. Far from promoting coherent food policies, some of their initiatives inhibited or even prevented them. Most of the prevailing ideas came from aid donors, often based not on long-term food needs but other concerns such as general economic liberalisation or short-term food crisis management.

Since the 1950s, China and India stand out among major developing countries for the success of their food policies. However, both relied on intensive inputs and they aggravated tendencies to economic and social inequality.

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# Food policies Key trends and

### Chinese self-sufficiency

After the People's Republic was established in 1949, one of its main preoccupations was to give land to China's many landless peasants. Mao Zedong's rule developed a sound basis for agricultural production and ensured a basic standard of living for everyone - despite big lurches along the way, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

After Mao's death, the household responsibility system built on this foundation to diversify supply and outputs, and self-sufficiency in basic foods remains a central plank of Chinese policy. However, there is now a huge gap between agrarian and urban incomes in China, with the worst poverty concentrated in rural areas.

### 1970s Green Revolution

In the 1960s, India was still known for periodic famines, but this changed with the Green Revolution and government distribution systems. The Green Revolution was based on new, hybrid varieties of rice, which required large amounts of fertiliser and irrigation. This produced more food but increased inequality in the countryside. The system of government stocks and food distribution to those in need provided the elements of a welfare state. In the long run this all led to regional inequalities in agriculture as well as soil degradation in productive areas due to the overuse of chemicals.

### The Structural Adjustment era

In the 1980s and 1990s, agriculture and food in the poorest countries, especially in Africa, were deeply affected by the policies of Structural Adjustment and macro-economic stabilisation imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This 'Washington Consensus' dominated economic policy until the millennium but progressively lost credibility after that.

With the slogan 'Get the Prices Right', Structural Adjustment was based on the idea of opening every nation up to world market forces. It was expected to produce the best results for development. Priority was given to cash crops for export, which were supposed to pay for any food imports. Any substantial role for the state in agriculture was abandoned, while imported food got access to domestic markets under the accompanying requirement to liberalise trade. The macro-economic achievements were at best patchy, and the poorest countries slid into dependence on food imports.

# and food security drivers

## World Trade Organisation

The WTO came into existence in 1995, with many more member countries than its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. It offered a freshly negotiated Agreement on Agriculture, which all members had to sign. This agreement entrenched the policy of cutting import tariffs while denying to developing countries many tools that are required for agricultural development. However, it retained avenues for rich countries to subsidise their food sectors.

As has been observed, 'The premise of WTO implies that maximizing agricultural trade should be countries' primary goal - ignoring countries' over-riding need to adequately feed their people.<sup>2</sup> The Agreement on Agriculture lies at the heart of disputes about the WTO and 11 years of failed negotiations since the abortive Seattle conference in 1999. The WTO already looks like a political failure.

## Food aid

Poor countries still run short of food and rich countries fill the gap, using the UN's World Food Programme (WFP). Emergency food distribution has gone through various phases, with an increasing emphasis on purchasing food in the country or region where the shortage occurs. This is now accompanied by a search for warnings of future shortages, and social protection of vulnerable people. Under food-for-work programmes, aid recipients sometimes help build roads, irrigation channels and other schemes to improve local agriculture.

None of this amounts to a food policy for the long term, but it has effects on supplies and consumption. Food aid tends to be needed repetitively in the same places, which creates dependence, even to the point of displacing agricultural employment with jobs in aid distribution. The nature of the food supplied can have consequences. Most often it is maize,



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which displaces lower-yielding but more robust local staples in the diets of aid-dependent areas, such as north-eastern Uganda or slums in Addis Ababa.

### Food weapons

In the 1970s there was much talk of the 'food weapon' as a means for the US to force poorer nations into line with its policies. The large US exports of grain to the USSR, at great financial cost to that country, played a major part in undermining the Soviet economy and creating the conditions for its collapse. It is not too fanciful to see a 'food aid weapon' in the strong US support for the WFP, which relies on grain supplies from the US. For example, aid programmes in the southern and Darfur areas of the Sudan – a whole sub-continental region in the WFP – help to detach those areas from Khartoum's control. Washington's PL480 programme buys surplus grain from US farmers and passes it on as aid to politically favoured countries.

### Millennium Development Goals

The first of the eight MDGs, declared by the UN in 2000, aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. It wants to halve the proportion of people suffering from hunger, using two indicators of success: the numbers of underweight children and people consuming less than minimum energy requirements. However, the MDG proposes no policies to achieve these goals. It was certainly a novel idea to determine policy just by writing down desired outcomes.

### Policies for Africa

Since 2000 there has been a renewed emphasis on food and agricultural needs in Africa. One of the main components of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, under the aegis of the African Union, is a Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme, with the stated aim of raising agricultural expenditure above 10% of government budgets. However, few countries have achieved this.

Some donors are promoting a 'Green Revolution for Africa', arguing that technology – including genetically modified seeds – should be relied on for production increases. There is strong political pressure behind this, especially in the US, but also resistance from agricultural and environmental lobbies. A scientific counter case appears in the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), which was initiated by the FAO and World Bank and endorsed by 61 governments around the world after it was published in 2008.

### What else can be done?

It is clear that alternative approaches to food policy are needed. It seems vain to suggest another tightly defined, hands-on global approach, and nor is that desirable: rich countries must at last behave as though other countries' independence means



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what it says. The 2008 financial crash should, at least, force them to become more humble.

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That said, some desirable common elements of policy can be suggested. In particular it is worth considering what was learnt from experience during the 1930s and 1940s, but then forgotten. The agricultural depression of the 1930s, followed by the disruption of trade during the Second World War, led to an emphasis on national food security, with as little reliance on external supplies as possible. The food price crisis of 2007-08 has created a new understanding of the need for food to come from national or regional sources.

Another emerging principle is to give priority to local seeds and traditional knowledge. In many countries this means indigenous crops rather than wheat, rice and maize, since the former suit local conditions naturally. There is a strong case for redirecting seed research to the yields of crops like sorghum, millet, cassava, yams and plantains rather than the major traded crops.

There should also be a willingness to accept tools like import controls, supply management and targeted subsidies, which were used successfully in past decades but became politically unacceptable under the free-market dogma of the last 30 years. Unless and until we see these changes, food security around the world will continue to be vulnerable to the whims of global policy élites, not to mention the threats posed by climate change. ■

- 2 The text of the 1943 conference's Final Act is available at [www.worldfooddayusa.org/?id=16367](http://www.worldfooddayusa.org/?id=16367) (April 2010).
- 3 Professor Daryl Ray, Director of Agricultural Policy Analysis Center, University of Tennessee, [www.csa-be.org/IMG/pdf\\_Food\\_reserve\\_D\\_Ray-2.pdf](http://www.csa-be.org/IMG/pdf_Food_reserve_D_Ray-2.pdf).

Tom Lines is author of *Making Poverty: a history*