

## Agribusiness Is the Problem, Not the Solution<sup>1</sup>

By Jomo Kwame Sundaram<sup>2</sup>

For two centuries, all too many discussions about hunger and resource scarcity has been haunted by the ghost of Parson Thomas Malthus. Malthus warned that rising populations would exhaust resources, especially those needed for food production. Exponential population growth would outstrip food output.

Humanity now faces a major challenge as global warming is expected to frustrate the production of enough food as the world population rises to 9.7 billion by 2050. Timothy Wise's new book ([Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food](#). New Press, New York, 2019) argues that most solutions currently put forward by government, philanthropic and private sector luminaries are misleading.



### Malthus' ghost returns

The early 2008 food price crisis has often been wrongly associated with the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. The number of hungry in the world was said to have risen to over a billion, feeding a resurgence of neo-Malthusianism.

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<sup>1</sup> First published on Interpress Service, on 19 February 2019 <http://www.ipsnews.net/2019/02/agribusiness-problem-not-solution/>.

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Agribusiness advocates feed such fears, insisting that food production must double by 2050, and high-yielding industrial agriculture, under the auspices of agribusiness, is the only solution. In fact, the world is mainly fed by hundreds of millions of small-scale, often called family farmers who produce over two-thirds of developing countries' food.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, neither food scarcity nor poor physical access are the main causes of food insecurity and hunger. Instead, Reuters has observed a 'global grain glut', with surplus cereal stocks piling up.

Meanwhile, poor production, processing and storage facilities cause food losses of an average of about a third of developing countries' output. A similar share is believed lost in rich countries due to wasteful food storage, marketing and consumption behaviour.

Nevertheless, despite grain abundance, the [2018 State of Food Insecurity report](#) — by the Rome-based United Nations food agencies led by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) — reported rising chronic and severe hunger or undernourishment involving more than 800 million.

Political, philanthropic and corporate leaders have promised to help struggling African and other countries grow more food, by offering to improve farming practices. New seed and other technologies would modernize those left behind.

But producing more food, by itself, does not enable the hungry to eat. Thus, agribusiness and its philanthropic promoters are often the problem, not the solution, in feeding the world.

[Eating Tomorrow](#) addresses related questions such as: Why doesn't rising global food production feed the hungry? How can we "feed the world" of rising populations and unsustainable pressure on land, water and other natural resources that farmers need to grow food?

### **Family farmers lack power**

Drawing on five years of extensive fieldwork in Southern Africa, Mexico, India and the US Mid-West, Wise concludes that the problem is essentially one of power. He shows how powerful business interests influence government food and agricultural policies to favour large farms.

This is typically at the expense of 'family' farmers, who grow most of the world's food, but also involves putting consumers and others at risk, e.g., due to agrochemical use. His many examples not only detail and explain the many problems small-scale farmers face, but also their typically constructive responses despite lack of support, if not worse, from most governments:

- In Mexico, trade liberalization following the 1993 North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) agreement swamped the country with cheap, subsidized US maize and pork, accelerating migration from the countryside. Apparently, this was actively encouraged by transnational pork producers employing 'undocumented' and un-ionised Mexican workers willing to accept low wages and poor working conditions.
- In Malawi, large government subsidies encouraged farmers to buy commercial fertilizers and seeds from US agribusinesses such as now Bayer-owned Monsanto,

but to little effect, as their productivity and food security stagnated or even deteriorated. Meanwhile, Monsanto took over the government seed company, favouring its own patented seeds at the expense of productive local varieties, while a former senior Monsanto official co-authored the national seed policy that threatens to criminalize farmers who save, exchange and sell seeds instead!

- In Zambia, greater use of seeds and fertilizers from agribusiness tripled maize production without reducing the country's very high rates of poverty and malnutrition. Meanwhile, as the government provides 250,000-acre 'farm blocks' to foreign investors, family farmers struggle for title to farm land.
- In Mozambique too, the government gives away vast tracts of farm land to foreign investors. Meanwhile, women-led cooperatives successfully run their own native maize seed banks.
- Meanwhile, Iowa promotes vast monocultures of maize and soybean to feed hogs and bioethanol rather than 'feed the world'.
- A large Mexican farmer cooperative launched an 'agro-ecological revolution', while the old government kept trying to legalize Monsanto's controversial genetically modified maize. Farmers have thus far halted the Monsanto plan, arguing that GM corn threatens the rich diversity of native Mexican varieties.

Much of the research for the book was done in 2014-15, when Obama was US president, although the narrative begins with developments and policies following the 2008 food price crisis, during Bush's last year in the White House. The book tells a story of US big business' influence on policies enabling more aggressive transnational expansion.

Yet, Wise remains optimistic, emphasizing that the world can feed the hungry, many of whom are family farmers. Despite the challenges they face, many family farmers are finding innovative and effective ways to grow more and better food. He advocates support for farmers' efforts to improve their soil, output and wellbeing.

## **Eating better**

Hungry farmers are nourishing their life-giving soils using more ecologically sound practices to plant a diversity of native crops, instead of using costly chemicals for export-oriented monocultures. According to Wise, they are growing more and better food, and are capable of feeding the hungry.

Unfortunately, most national governments and international institutions still favour large-scale, high-input, industrial agriculture, neglecting more sustainable solutions offered by family farmers, and the need to improve the wellbeing of poor farmers.

Undoubtedly, many new agricultural techniques offer the prospect of improving the welfare of farmers, not only by increasing productivity and output, but also by limiting costs, using scarce resources more effectively, and reducing the drudgery of farm work.

But the world must recognize that farming may no longer be viable for many who face land, water and other resource constraints, unless they get better access to such resources. Meanwhile, malnutrition of various types affects well over two billion people in the world, and industrial agriculture contributes about 30% of greenhouse gas emissions.

Going forward, it will be important to ensure affordable, healthy and nutritious food supplies for all, mindful not only of food and water safety, but also of various pollution

threats. A related challenge will be to enhance dietary diversity affordably to overcome micronutrient deficiencies and diet-related non-communicable diseases for all.

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To know more:

- Timothy Wise, [Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food](#). New Press, New York, 2019.
- FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, [State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World](#), 2018.

Earlier articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- [Privatisation of development assistance: integrating further agriculture into the world market](#), 2018.
- [Are industrial megafarms the solution for feeding the world?](#) 2018.
- [Food crises: A consequence of disastrous economic policies](#), 2012/2017.
- [How “philanthropic” is global philanthropy?](#) 2016.
- [Hunger is a political issue: its eradication will require more democracy](#), 2014.
- [The food and agricultural policy paradox](#), 2012.