



SEARCH



The Future of Food and Farming: Challenges and choices for future sustainability, (Foresight Report, London, UK Government, Office for Science. WEB: January, 2011)

This is a very good report. It does address the issue of food security in a global context, it looks at the industry as a whole, not just food production on the farm, it recognises that this industry can only be understood within the economic system of which it forms part, it reflects what is the current consensus on some key uncertainties about climate, the prospects for research based increments in productivity and the conventional wisdom on political social issues such as the need to ensure freedom from famine for vulnerable populations and the importance of the non-food outputs of land use.

This ensures it will have a powerful influence on the development of policy.

The Report might be criticised for taking too little account of the autonomous adaptation in patterns of behaviour that changing circumstances will bring about over a period of fifty years. This tends to encourage a too precipitate shift from diagnosis to prescription.

In a political context this is understandable, it looks defeatist to identify a problem but fail to propose a solution. However, many of the solutions proposed rely on assumptions about the behaviour of other countries and agencies over which the UK government has no control.

We have to face the reality that while some of these actions may claim the moral high ground, if others do not act in concert, the impact can be to weaken the UK competitiveness without having any perceptible impact on the global problem identified.

Several issues identified in the report lead to the following comments:

1. The assumption that the world overall will be richer, does not match the alarm that resource scarcity threatens survival. The conventional economic analysis suggests that prices would rise choking off demand and bringing about a redistribution of income.

Those who would have to go without, even to the point of failing to survive, would be those with low relative incomes or entitlements. Entitlements can arise as a result of family solidarity or through interpersonal transfers via a social security system.

This is not a future scenario. Today those with too few entitlements or too low an income already die during famine, are victims of epidemic disease or suffer disproportionately from the vagaries of weather, volcanoes, earthquakes etc.

2. The paper's analysis that the current rate of growth in population will lead to unsustainable demands on land, water and energy is an important signal that it will not happen.

The more refined analysis is central to what sorts of adjustment are feasible and what actions might reduce the number of those who fall below the 'survival' level.

This analysis looks for example at the pressure on critical inputs that are in limited supply, (e.g. some fertilisers), at the efficiency with which resources are converted into output, (productivity), at changes in the nature of demand resulting from changes in lifestyle and convictions about health, and waste in terms both of pollution and as a potential route for increasing overall efficiency.

3. The scale of action demanded depends upon how various key uncertainties play out. Leading these is the issue of climate change. Global

warming is generally accepted, but the rate of change, the distribution of impacts and the way in which society adapts are much less clear.

It is virtually certain that simply projecting recent trends will mislead. Equally uncertain is the impact of changing technology. This has several different aspects, first discoveries in fundamental science, second the application of these within an economic system and third their acceptability to populations.

History suggests that a positive attitude is justified but it cannot be taken for granted. An uncertainty that is little discussed is the impact of changes in real wealth distribution on the peace of the world.

It is not unrealistic to see emerging tensions between the new economies of the East, the value systems that dominate the Middle East and the interests of the West. We already have localised wars, it would be unrealistic to rule out global conflict.

4. The scope for action depends upon the viability of political judgements that will be challenged by events. Classical amongst these are the actions taken to deliver such 'public goods' as biodiversity, landscapes and clean air and water.

For some, these goods have been treated as of absolute value so that human activity must be adapted to accommodate them.

For others they are seen as falling into one of two categories, those essential to preserve the basic necessities of life and those that add delight through their aesthetic benefit, through sustaining diverse human communities and through maintaining a clear record of the past.

For this group the test will be how many of these benefits society can afford linked to issues about how to deliver them with greatest efficiency.

5. Attempts to deliver food security by a top down approach have little hope of long-term success.

The most convincing example would be the UK food rationing programme in the Second World War.

However, even here and still more in other countries, rationing systems were partly undermined by 'black markets'.

The approach via regulating prices goes some way to leaving decisions by individuals about what to cut and what to protect. However, long term price controls – as for example in pre-1989 Eastern Europe, lead to massive waste and technological stagnation.

More durable results can result from actions that facilitate the discovery and application of new technologies and from changing individual preferences in relation, not only to health, but to what is perceived as good food.

The capacity for change at this level is substantial as the growth of ethnic food in the UK during the past few decades illustrates.

This implies that the goal of government price policy must be limited to remedying market failure, where market prices diverge from the social value of products or resources, and engaging in a dialogue with the population based on their interests and rooted in the best evidence available.

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Comments

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