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If you eat, you're involved— there's nowhere to run

ALL talk is of the length and breadth of recession, but it is the impact on food availability that should be top of our concerns. Agriculture and food production are suffering from the financial crisis just like other sectors, but there is one huge difference: we can do without many consumer goods, but we cannot do without food. And if that doesn't worry you, remember that a hungry population is often an angry population, as we saw in 2008 when several countries, mainly in Asia, were threatened because of shortages of staple crops.

Financial conditions are seriously compromising the ability of farmers to feed the world's growing population. Agriculture is a tough business at the best of times. It is at the mercy of unpredictable climatic conditions, water, land and input availability, and, in many parts of the world, the health and nutrition of the local population. To a large extent, food production must follow demand, simply because there is limited ability to store and distribute large volumes. Agriculture and crop production are, overall, the world's largest consumer of water and the largest absorber of CO₂. In other words, agriculture should be at the forefront of efforts to ameliorate climate change and develop a sustainable society.

Historically, we have been able to maintain our ability to feed ourselves primarily by increasing productivity. There were fewer than two billion people at the beginning of the 20th century, and yet, by the end of it, we were feeding six billion; now, we have to plan to feed nine billion by 2050. To achieve that—and we must—we need greater focus on the wise use of land and water and of science. Many people, particularly in developed countries, have a romantic view of farming and think that we should go back to the 'old ways'. We don't have the luxury to romanticise about agriculture if we are to feed the world, and if that's not our goal, then there should be a call for 'volunteers' from the developed world to go hungry. Increases in food prices are not inevitable either. Over the past several hundred years, the relative cost of food has actually decreased—at least in developed countries.

What are the solutions?

To avoid a food security crisis, we need to minimise the barriers to trade in agriculture products and let markets operate properly and freely. There is no excuse for restricting trade in agricultural

products by constructing false trade barriers or for allowing export subsidies that undermine developing-country producers. The president of the Kenya National Federation of Agricultural Producers, Nduati Kariuki, said: 'Africa has the potential to grow three times the food it requires.' We must ensure that developed-world policies to protect farmers don't prevent that happening. There is also no excuse for allowing the hoarding of food supplies and encouraging black markets and speculative market behaviour.

We must continue to implement new technology. History has shown that agriculture has been a prime beneficiary of a huge range of new technologies, from genetics and informatics to soil fertility and transportation. We should see all responsible science as a valuable input to the production of food. A priority must be to free up the credit market for agriculture and food production. Greater financial resources need to be made available for well-managed and coordinated development projects. Food-aid programmes, although often necessary in the short term, are not a substitute for adequate investment in production and fair-trade policies.

It's good that the recent meeting of the G8 group of countries' agriculture ministers gave official recognition to the food-security challenge and placed it at the core of the political agenda, but it was disappointing that it took the food crisis to trigger the needed response. Unfortunately, it has yet to offer solutions.

Speakers at the World Agricultural Forum's World Congress in St Louis this month have been tasked with defining the issues, suggesting strategies and proposing solutions. The world needs to better understand the drivers and challenges of agriculture and food production, including food storage, marketing strategies (such as farmer co-ops for developing-country producers), available credit, and appropriate innovation and technology. Another issue is whether it is wise and, if so, in what circumstances, for us to use food crops and limited land and water resource to produce biofuels. Land and water are our most precious resources and, if we eat, we're all involved. There's nowhere to run—we only have one planet and we have to be much smarter in how we use its bounty to meet the needs of everyone, not just the favoured few.

Rt Hon Jim Bolger, chairman of the Advisory Board of the World Agricultural Forum and former Prime Minister of New Zealand

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