Book Review

The Global Food Crisis, edited by Jennifer Clapp & Marc J. Cohen

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Between early 2007 and mid-2008, global food prices increased by more than fifty percent.1 For people living in poverty in developing countries, who might spend sixty to eighty percent of their income on food, such a severe increase was devastating.2 The debilitating price increases resulted in food riots across over forty developing nations.3 Although food prices have fallen considerably since that period, they are still substantially higher than 2005 levels.4 Thus, in a March 2009 interview with the Financial Times, Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, stated that the “food crisis is not over.”5

Dizzying price volatility and ensuing street demonstrations motivated policymakers to enact various new measures. For example, India introduced “draconian export restrictions” on rice and Argentina “attempted to expand export taxes,” both of which contributed to the price increases.6 Such panicked attempts at addressing the food crisis highlight the need for reasoned, comprehensive governance reforms to ensure global food security. The Global Food Crisis: Governance Challenges and Opportunities, a collection of essays based on a December 2008 workshop held at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, presents individual authors’ perspectives on causal factors influencing the food crisis.

2. Id. at 3.
3. Id. at 1.
4. Id.
6. GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS, supra note 1, at xi.
crisis, immediate governance challenges arising from increased food prices, long-term ecological issues associated with current global food systems, and potential strategies to enhance food security in the future.

The first section features four perspectives on the causes of the 2008 global food crisis. The authors more or less agree on the immediate cause: an imbalance of supply and demand. The supply decrease came about because of a gradual slowing of agricultural production, accompanied by declining global grain stocks and increasing energy costs, which raised production costs.

At the same time, emerging economies, mainly China and India, have demonstrated an increased demand for higher quality food—in this case meat, which requires a great deal more supply input to produce. Finally, speculation by hedge funds and other investors in the food commodities market artificially increased demand. The futures market for food is designed to be a stabilizing tool for farmers to sell harvests ahead of time, which works if speculators buy when prices are low and sell when prices are high. But deregulation on Wall Street has allowed banks to speculate in futures contracts in unlimited quantities, leading to huge upward price pressure. The demand for grain has also increased due to biofuel production; as corn is diverted to create ethanol, corn stocks decline and corn prices increase. Meanwhile, high corn prices shift demand to other grains, and land used for other grains shifts to corn—another factor causing a decrease in supply.

Kimberly Ann Elliot, one of this section’s four authors, argues that U.S. biofuel policy is the single most important cause of grain price increases. She draws attention to corn ethanol’s high energy cost both in terms of actual production and in forcing the cultivation of new land for corn inputs. Taking all of this into account, biofuels in fact increase net emissions.

Anuradha Mittal disagrees on the relative importance of some of these short-term causes. For example, she argues that there has not been a great increase in demand for meat in India. Mittal points to the cultural preference in India against red meat consumption, as well as the fact that India remains a grain exporter. Her main focus, however, is on long-term structural factors as the key underlying causes of the food crisis. For example, many developing countries have shifted from subsistence to single cash crops for export (such as cotton, coffee, or bananas). When the prices of these commodities change, as they often do, a country’s macroeconomic activities and income distributions are affected. This also forces countries to import their food crops, making them vulnerable to changes in food prices. This push from food crop to cash crop is drastically increased by the fact that rich countries subsidize their agriculture, which allows them to sell below cost. Finally, Mittal points out that investment in agricultural productivity, which has been falling since 1980, has led to less agricultural research and fewer agricultural projects. These changes have unbalanced and weakened the global food system in the last few decades, allowing short-term supply shocks to devastate the world. She thus compellingly argues that attention to the risk of short-term crisis
precipitators should be balanced with a more comprehensive treatment of key structural issues.

Jennifer Clapp similarly reiterates the immediate causes of the food crisis, and calls on readers to see the larger macroeconomic forces at play. For example, the U.S. Federal Reserve cut interest rates in 2007-2008, keeping the dollar weak against other currencies. The depreciation of the dollar generally leads to a rise in commodity prices, although economists are not certain as to all the reasons why. Speculation in food commodities probably exacerbated the effect. Additionally, as prices began to rise, many developing countries—Vietnam, Argentina, Egypt, for example—imposed restrictions on exports to insulate their economies. This policy may help at home, but serves to worsen the situation globally. Clapp, like Mittal, suggests that solutions must take into account these broader factors if the food system is to be fixed, and suggests a few first steps, including ending export bans.

Lastly, Sue Horton’s essay discusses the similarities between the recent food crisis and the food crisis of 1974. She spends most of the essay outlining the remarkable parallels between the two crises, including supply shocks, energy price increases, and increased demand, but does not provide much commentary as to why this is important for future events. Although her stated intention is to learn lessons from the policy failures of the 1974 event, she devotes just three short pages to advice, and most of it simply describes the failure to set up a functioning international oversight organization after the 1974 crisis (two of the three established institutions are now defunct, and the third played almost no role in 2008). She offers what she calls “the usual economist perspective, that removing obvious market distortions is important.” Later, she identifies the importance of micronutrients, “given [her] own research agenda.” But neither piece of advice seems particularly connected with her historical inquiry.

Given the authors’ diverging approaches, it is not clear whether we should agree with one over the other, or with all of them at once, or how to integrate the many suggestions that they each offer. But the four essays do succeed at showing the diversity of perspectives on the causes of the food crisis, and illuminating its extremely complex origins: in long- and short-term decisionmaking processes across a host of countries, in changes in supply and demand, and in the macroeconomic structure of the food commodities market.

Knowing the causes of the recent global food crisis is an important first step in the difficult and complicated process of attaining food security. But without specific, achievable, and far-reaching goals, understanding the causes is a far cry from finding the solutions. Although the contributors to Global Food Crisis seem to have a generally unified idea of the various factors that most directly caused the crisis, described in detail in the first section, they diverge greatly in the solutions they propose. In the second section, several authors highlight immediate governance concerns,
particularly emergency response measures, such as food aid shipments or physical food reserves. But given the extent of the crisis—after such drastic food price volatility and resulting civil unrest—it is odd to see that some of the proposals are essentially only minor changes.

Most of C. Stuart Clark’s chapter, for example, argues for a Food Assistance Convention to replace the existing multilateral treaty for food transfers, the Food Aid Convention. But his concern for a name change, revised rules of procedure, and increased transparency in the Food & Agriculture Organization fo the U.N. (FAO) overlooks the core of the matter. One more promising recommendation, which could have benefited from further analysis, is Clark’s description of a “human rights approach” to food assistance. This involves the principle of “respecting and protecting the right to food,” and the goal of “support[ing] national governments to ensure that the right to food is realized for those facing hunger.” By recognizing a right to food, a human rights approach to emergency food aid might effect a universally stronger focus on ameliorating the suffering of the most hungry people during the time when they most need assistance. In the chapter, however, there is no explanation of the importance of such an approach, what it might look like, or what might result from it.

Perhaps the most fascinating and promising of the four chapters on immediate governance concerns is Raymond F. Hopkins’s depiction of an insurance-oriented regime replacing our current pro-cyclical, reactive food assistance practices. Hopkins notes that a fundamental change in food aid occurs every twenty years, and that the impending successor regime will involve a transformation from a charitable relationship “to a more rational-legal relationship of policy holder and insurer or re-insurer.” Such a regime would seek to avoid the problems associated with aid that is dependent on donors’ contemporaneous circumstances. The chapter is focused on historical description and general advantages to an insurance-based system but mentions few actual proposals. Hopkins briefly refers to an International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) plan which “is consistent with the principles by which insurance operates to build assets available for release to those harmed.” Frederic Mousseau describes the proposal as a “virtual reserve” which would be funded by pledges from “big exporting countries and would be used to intervene in grain futures markets to discourage speculation when prices are rising”; the proposal is premised on the idea that speculation on futures was a “key factor of the price increase.”

Meanwhile, however, Mousseau argues against the IFPRI plan, questioning whether it is realistic, necessary, or effective. At the end of the chapter, he suggests several alternatives. One potentially effective proposal is for other developing countries to follow the lead of countries like

9. Id. at 102.
10. Id. at 102-03.
11. Id. at 88.
12. Id. at 89.
13. Id. at 106-07.
Malawi, which was “able to negotiate and secure the procurement of food at pre-agreed prices on the regional food exchange.” Unfortunately, Mousseau devotes only a paragraph to each proposal and provides scarcely enough description to introduce the reader to each, much less to provide an actual guide to enact such a policy.

Balancing a multiplicity of viewpoints with an adequate depth of analysis is a significant challenge for compilations of essays such as this one. Each chapter is a separate, short piece, describing a self-contained set of problems and proposals. The book is filled with fascinating, high-level ideas, but it is difficult for each author to develop a full, substantive set of proposals in fifteen pages. If Mousseau could have an entire section of a book to explain his proposals, we could have a clearer idea what it means, for instance, to “think regionally,” and how to implement such a proposal. Likewise, Gawain Kripke’s chapter on U.S. participation in food aid does a great job of explaining political realities influencing food policy within the U.S., the donor of close to half of all international food aid. However, his chapter would benefit if it more clearly tied past political accomplishments and frustrations with present tools and opportunities.

Next, the authors discuss some of the ecological concerns highlighted by the food crisis, particularly climate change and the limited global supply of the fossil fuel inputs required for the current system of industrial agriculture, and offer suggestions for governance responses. The authors share a concern for implementing sustainable, locally-based agricultural methods that will ensure food security in changing climates. Additionally, two of the authors argue for a refocus on how we view food security using a human rights or “moral economy” framework. Such a framework would view food security and access to food, rather than economic efficiency, as the most important goal of the global food system.

Cristina Tirado, Marc J. Cohen, Noora-Lisa Aberman, and Brian Thompson identify some of the dangers climate change poses to food and water security. The essay’s strength lies in its organized and thoughtful approach to the various issues posed by climate change. The essay looks separately at the impact of climate change on particularly vulnerable regions, such as coastal areas; vulnerable populations, such as subsistence farmers; and gender vulnerability, pointing out that climate change may add to the labor burdens of rural women who are responsible for finding food and water for their families. Next, the authors separate out the four dimensions of food security to discuss how climate change will affect each one. For example, food availability will be changed for better and for worse as crops change; food stability and access will be adversely affected, especially due to alien invasive species. However, their analysis is weakened by its lack of specificity for the solutions they offer. For example, the authors find that “[p]olicy-based adaptations to climate change may include policies on natural resource management, human and animal health, governance, and political rights, among many others.”

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14. Id. at 111.
15. Id.
16. Id. at 138.
offering a generalist survey of available policy options, this list fails to provide a basis for adequately discerning which of the multiple options is superior and why. Similarly, although the authors assert that adopting a human rights framework could focus countries’ attention on the impacts of climate change to food security by prioritizing food security over efficiency, it is not clear how one would go about creating such a framework.

Noah Zerbe further criticizes market efficiency as a priority of the global system, and similarly argues for a shift in focus regarding the goals of the global food market to ensure common well-being rather than the most economically efficient allocation of resources. Zerbe argues that the market is currently skewed by overregulation in the global North, as rich countries heavily subsidize their food crops, allowing them to undercut subsistence farmers in developing countries thereby driving developing countries to cash crops. At the same time, the World Bank and other international organizations have pushed for underregulation in the Global South, under the logic that gains made by comparative advantage, lowering prices for consumers and raising incentives for producers, would guarantee food security. In fact, this has left emerging economies vulnerable to destabilization by market forces and caused severe food security issues. Zerbe provides a typical example in Zimbabwe, whose maize production declined after the country was forced to privatize its seed industry, exacerbating rural poverty and hunger.

Meanwhile, Tony Weis is concerned not with the climate consequences of fossil fuel agriculture, but rather with its inherent lack of sustainability. He argues for the need to reconceptualize modern agriculture. He points out the many hidden costs of fossil fuels, as well as the need to find other sources as fossil fuel stores dwindle. Like Elliot, he notes that biofuels have thin energy margins, even as they require additional land to be cultivated for crops to convert into these fuels. Instead of biofuels, he proposes greater labor inputs in farming— that is, requiring farmers to go back to preindustrial, labor-intensive methods of maintaining and building soil fertility. He hints at the potential problems this might cause, as such pre-industrial revolution farming was “rarely a farmer-, worker-, or gender-equity paradise.” 17 But again, while it is important to remind the reader that dwindling fossil fuels will cause an agricultural crisis that may result in massive social upheaval, there is a frustrating lack of suggestions on how best to manage such change. For example, Weis glosses over the fact that greater labor inputs require a large percentage of a country’s population to move into agricultural work. 18

The final few chapters of the book introduce additional recommendations for the future of food assistance. The broad themes of the section are long-term food security, sustainability, and regional solutions. Given the causes of the crisis, immediate governance challenges, and ecological issues with the current global food and agriculture system, what

17. Id. at 157.
18. Id. at 156-57.
might a system which ensures enduring stability look like? The contributing authors’ suggestions range from a general call for “[r]estoring higher rates of productivity growth worldwide” to “recommendations for institutional change to be incorporated into an immediate plan of action” for U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization renewal.19

Mark Redwood touts urban agriculture as an avenue for food security in his well-organized and deftly written chapter. Redwood first describes the conditions that led to the crisis: the historical trend of urbanization, city dwellers’ reliance on tradable commodities (which are particularly exposed to market volatility), and reduced access to land and other food inputs. He then describes existing urban agricultural measures. Urban agricultural is essentially agriculture in, or on the fringe of, a city, “(re)using largely human and material resources, products and services found in and around that urban area, and in turn supplying” such resources to that urban area.20 Redwood offers some data on the role of urban agricultural in various countries’ food systems; for example, urban agricultural provides eighty percent of leafy vegetables in Brazzaville, Congo. He suggests that urban agricultural can be a way to minimize the risk that volatile prices bring about. Redwood then lists obstacles to the spread of urban agriculture, primarily government opposition to perceived resistance to planned urban development, and current problems with urban agriculture, including the risk of raising livestock in heavily urbanized areas. His chapter goes beyond mere generalities on the benefits of a regional focus to food aid. The chapter presents a balanced, useful, and specific recommendation on how to “prioritize[] local markets,” through pursuing the development of urban agriculture in developing countries.21

Marcia Ishii-Eiteman’s contribution on the need for a systemic overhaul to the global food system includes several provocative proposals. One such idea is a rights-based approach to food aid. Ishii-Eiteman notes that the “central question for sustainable food systems in human rights terms is: ‘Who will produce food, how, and for whose benefit?’”22 Ishii-Eiteman asserts that this question “provides the central unifying thread running through the tapestry of options facing policy-makers.”23 Another intriguing idea, revising intellectual property laws to increase protection for “indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems,” is addressed briefly.24 Unfortunately, the chapter gives the sense that it is simply a reiteration of U.N. reports, especially the U.N.-led International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, which is referenced abundantly throughout the chapter.

20. Id. at 209.
21. Id. at 210.
23. Id. at 220.
24. Id. at 231.
Among the extensive discussion throughout *The Global Food Crisis* on donor and recipient governments, large institutions like the U.N.’s World Food Programme, and regional agricultural development, a lamentable deficiency is the lack of emphasis on private sector investment. Emmy Simmons and Julie Howard’s chapter, which focuses on food security in sub-Saharan Africa, includes a few passing mentions of the private sector. They mention the potential of supporting private-sector investment such as microfinance organizations and include an even briefer suggestion about leveraging additional capital through public-private partnerships. The book as a whole, however, devotes almost no attention to such ideas, despite an acknowledgement from several authors that private players have a large role in the current food system. As Jennifer Clapp and Marc J. Cohen note, “private actors loom large in the global food system.”

The weakness of *The Global Food Crisis*—its diversity of approaches—is also its strength. Sifting through the many contributions, a reader can find gems of analysis on a variety of topics and suggestions that range from the extremely general to the highly specific. A reader looking for a coherent set of governance principles and strategies to guide us through the food crisis will be disappointed, but the book is packed with plenty of suggestions that a reader can choose from in deciding where to begin. This speaks to the vastness of the problem that faces the world today; it is multifaceted and intractable, with long- and short-term causes, each of which requires an adequate response. Clapp and Cohen’s volume does the important job of illuminating much of the structure of this vast problem, with a few specific proposals—such as urban agriculture, reforming the Food Aid Convention, reforming U.S. biofuel policy—sprinkled in. Most importantly, the book highlights the deeper instabilities of our food system at a time when some may be lulled by the end of the 2008 crisis, with prices returning to reasonable levels for the time being. Clapp and Cohen emphasize the urgent need to begin addressing the structure of our global food system if we are to prevent another crisis and ensure food security for developing countries in the 21st century.

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25. *Id.* at 6.