

Can we free the world of hunger and Malthus's shadow forever? Opinion Piece by Dr Shenggen Fan*

Two centuries ago, Thomas Malthus predicted that food production would eventually fall short of population growth, leading to misery, vice, sickness, and starvation. His prediction failed to materialize as technological innovations in agriculture have largely allowed food production to keep pace with population growth—thus far.

Today we face new challenges in feeding the world population. Hunger remains persistent with one in seven people going hungry each day and micronutrient deficiencies plaguing more than 2 billion people around the world. Population growth and urbanization, natural resource scarcity, and climate change challenge prospects for stabilizing future food systems. Just in the past five years we have experienced several food price spikes and episodes of volatility. The recent drought in the United States has led to a new round of food price spikes. Since the beginning of June, international prices for maize and soybeans increased by 23 and 22 percent respectively, with daily prices for both crops reaching record highs.

To confront the challenges that threaten future global food security and free the world of Malthus's shadow, we should focus our efforts on facilitating global coordination to reduce food price volatility, including creating strategic emergency food reserves, ensuring open trade, and eliminating grain-based biofuel production.

We should also invest in productive social safety nets to protect poor and vulnerable groups, especially women and children, and ensure their access to nutritious and healthy food in the short run while improving human capital for long-term prosperity.

Increasing investments in agricultural research and development is needed to accelerate agricultural productivity, especially smallholder productivity; improve nutritional quality of food crops; and increase resource-use efficiency.

We should also invest in agricultural climate change mitigation and adaptation, including practices and technological innovations to transform agriculture into a low-carbon sector; and we must support less developed countries to improve their policymaking capacity and enhance institutions and governance in agriculture and the food system.

Australia has long played an active role in advancing global food security, through the efforts of institutions such as the Australian Government Overseas Aid Program (AusAID) and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), as well as individuals like Sir John Crawford, who served as an architect of CGIAR—a global agriculture research partnership—and as the first-ever board chairman of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), one of the 15 CGIAR research centers. It is vital for Australia to continue to invest in global food and nutrition security for future generations.

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