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Michael Pollan: In Perspective



By Marshall Matz

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Michael Pollan, the Knight Professor of Journalism at Berkeley, is a very gifted journalist with a warm and personal writing style. His popular book, *In Defense of Food* offers the public rules for a healthy diet: “Shop the peripheries of the supermarket and stay out of the middle; Avoid food products that make health claims; Don’t eat anything your great grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food; and, Avoid food products containing ingredients that are unpronounceable or more than five in number.” It is hard not to be seduced by his simplicity and panache.

Further, Pollan’s concern over the alarming obesity epidemic in America is totally justified. Obesity is our number one public health challenge and a risk factor in the etiology of our major killer diseases.

But then I run into a problem with Pollan. American farmers and ranchers have accomplished a virtual modern miracle by creating the most efficient, safe and economical food supply in the history of the world. Pollan himself acknowledges that “We spend a smaller percentage of our income on food than any other industrialized society.” Instead of celebrating this achievement, however, Pollan turns our success into a failure. “We need to give up cheap food,” he declares, in order to fight obesity. This is where Michael Pollan loses me.

There are a billion people in the world going hungry, struggling to survive on a daily basis. According to the USAID Administrator, Dr. Raj Shah, some 400 million are children. Over the next few decades, the population of our planet will explode from 7 billion people to 9 billion by mid-century. Unless we drastically increase food production, there will be a major increase in hunger throughout the world.

Don’t get me wrong. There is nothing sacred about American Farm Bills. There are plenty of issues for reasonable people to argue about in shaping U.S. food policy - particularly in times of tight budget. But what Michael Pollan suggests is deeper - that the best way to end obesity is to make food, particularly the core row crops, more expensive as a matter of policy. “For the majority of Americans, spending more for better food is less a matter of ability than priority,” he argues.

This might be true for the small, lucky minority of people on planet earth who have enough money to make better, more-nutritious food a simple lifestyle priority choice. But for everyone else, the real world impact of “giving up cheap food” would be drastic and dire.

Here in the United States, millions of families already rely on Federal nutrition programs such food stamps (now the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Giving up “cheap food” would not only mean an increase in hunger but also an increase in the amount of money we would need to spend on Federal nutrition programs.

Outside of the United States, our country’s limited budget for humanitarian assistance would feed fewer people if the price of commodities goes up. A staple of our food aid for school children in Africa is CSB --- Corn Soy Blend -- the exact two commodities that Pollan targets for higher prices. If the cost of soy and corn go up, the quantity we can buy with Federal appropriations goes down along with the number of children being served. This type of math is not complicated.

As a result of American agriculture programs, US consumers spend only 10 percent of their disposable income today on food. If the Congress abandoned these programs and the cost of food rose to 15, 18 or 20 percent of disposable income, it would send shock waves through the U.S. economy.

Our farmers and ranchers are the marvel of the world. They constitute only one percent of the U.S. population, but they are so productive that they feed the entire country and much of the world. Let’s stop taking this blessing, this success story, and turning it on its head.

In order to feed the world we will need every advantage of science to boost production. It includes new biotech seeds that can increase yields while using fewer inputs and less water. It includes hybrid seeds that are being introduced today in Africa along with fertilizer and mechanization. At the Jipe Moyo Self Help Group in Kitale, Kenya, I recently met sixty farmers who are living off of just 150 acres by using these new seeds and sharing one tractor. They are planting the seeds by hand but using a simple rope with markers on it to space crop rows, seeds in each row and to determine how far from a seed to place the fertilize.



On many farms in Kenya, seeds are planted by hand. Photos by the author.



Dr. Rebbie Harawa shows a maize meter used for spacing seeds.



Women do the weeding and harvesting by hand in Kenya.

Feeding the hungry is a moral imperative of every major religion. We can feed the planet only if (a) we follow sound science when it comes to agriculture and environmental policy; and (b) we all agree that food production is the primary priority for agriculture.

The Obama Administration recently put out a White House Memorandum stressing the importance of using the best available science and USAID followed with a publication entitled “Delivering Improved Nutrition.” The focus is on utilizing science to improve the nutritional quality of food.

Science is essential to boost food production and improve the environment--just as it has been used to improve communication, transportation and health care. Going back to the diet of your great grandmother might be a healthy choice for some of the affluent, but for most people it is no more realistic than giving up our blackberries, laptops or jet travel.

Michael Pollan might not have had Africa, or the poor, in mind when he wrote *In Defense of Food*, but the world is small and interdependent. We need effective strategies to combat obesity, but they must not penalize the hungry.

Speaking to the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs last week, Bill Gates explained the link between the cost of food and poverty perfectly: “When a family spends more than half its income on food, and prices rise - they have no choice: they have to sell belongings, pull children from school, and stop spending on health. All of this drags them deeper into poverty. And if millions of desperate people can’t feed their families, instability follows.”

About the Author: Marshall Matz served as Counsel to the Senate Committee on Agriculture and is now a partner at OFW Law. He serves on the Boards of the World Food Program--US, the Congressional Hunger Center and the Global Child Nutrition Foundation."