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Are Biofuels The Cause of The International Food Crisis?

The global food crisis is now a major international issue. With seemingly little warning, food and crop prices have soared, threatening the plunge millions into starvation or poverty. Governments across the globe are striving to address the situation, but what was its cause.

Many believe that the production of biofuels is to blame. Production of biofuels has begun due to the increasingly prominent issue of fossil fuels; their sustainability, or lack of it, and pollutive nature. Yet is this increase the cause of the international food crisis?

An editorial comment in the New York Times believed this to be a contributing factor to the international food crisis. The editor reaches the conclusion that the global food crisis has many different causes, but does focus on blaming biofuels, stating that "the rich world is exasperating these effects by supporting the production of biofuels" (New York Times, April 10th 08). He quite clearly targets the biofuel production as the cause, quoting the International Monetary Fund's statistics showing that the US corn ethanol production accounted for more than half of the rise in world corn demand (New York Times, April 10th 08).

The argument given by the editor does have many strengths. Firstly, the source is rather reputable, it is a broadsheet newspaper. Moreover, the author presents a well reasoned argument, for instance, he clearly explains how the increase in corn ethanol production directly led to an increase in strain on the world food economy.

However, there is a slight flaw in the editor's argument when looking at biofuels as the cause. The editor claims that, "the rich world is exasperating these effects..." (New York Times, April 10th 08). The language here, the use of the word 'exasperates', implies that biofuels are not the cause of the food crisis, but merely that their use increases the effect of the contributing factors. Therefore, the article illustrates that biofuels themselves are not a direct cause of the food crisis, although they do increase its severity. Yet, overall the source is rather reliable and so the conclusion could be presumed to be correct for the reasoning given.

Furthermore, in support of the first article, a secret report issued by the World Bank condemned biofuels as the cause of the food crisis. The report concluded that, "the increase in food prices was caused by a confluence of factors but the most important was the large increase in biofuels production in the US and EU" (World Bank Report, page 12). Therefore claiming that biofuel production is the main cause of the global food crisis. The report does give strong reasons tending to this conclusion, including graphs illustrating the rising maize consumption for biofuels and the rise in food prices. Similarly to the previous source, the report does state that the crisis has been caused by many contributing factors such as "back-to-back droughts in Australia" (World Bank Report, page 12). On the other hand, it does explain how several of these other issues were themselves caused by the biofuel related consumption, "Without the increase in biofuels production global wheat and maize stocks would not have declined appreciably and price increases due to other factors would have been moderate. The export bans and speculative activity would not have occurred because they were responses to the rising prices" (World Bank Report, page 12).

However, there is a weakness in the argument. The author refers to the biofuel industry using 50 tonnes of the 55 tonne increase in production in one year. As the biofuels need less than the increase, no less food is being produced in comparison to the year before. Therefore, the real issue is the increase in food demand, that is caused more food to be needed, rather than the biofuels requiring crops.

Yet the source has many strengths. Firstly, its provenance is from a very reputable and reliable source, with little or no bias, and therefore can be seen as reliable. Moreover, the conclusion is well supported, with many well structured reasons and much statistical evidence, which clearly shows the validity of reasons. Thus, the source as a whole is rather reliable and the conclusion can be assumed to be valid.

Finally, a speech by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil disagrees with the

conclusions of the previous sources. Silva claims that, "Biofuels are not the villain menacing food security in poor countries. Quite the contrary, when cultivated responsibly, in harmony with each country's reality, they can be important tools to generate income and pull countries out of food and energy insecurity" (Silva, 3rd June 2008). Silva reasons that as for the last thirty years ethanol production has increased, and so has crop yields, the production of ethanol has no negative effects on crop production (Silva, 3rd June 2008). Therefore, Silva clearly identifies biofuels as a benefit to the poorer countries' economies.

There are very few strengths in Silva's argument. He gives statistical evidence to illustrate that although ethanol production has risen, crop production has not been effective, therefore giving his argument more validity. He also attempts to ensure that the statistics he gives are accurate and unbiased by using UN collected evidence.

However, the argument is flawed in many ways. To begin with, Silva relies heavily upon a use of rhetoric in his argument, often appealing to the listeners' emotions. For instance Silva claims that "It is frightening, therefore, to see attempts to draw a cause-and-effect relationship between biofuels and the rise in food prices" (Silva, 3rd June 2008). Moreover, rather than analyzing and assessing the opposing argument, he uses the 'ad hominem' flaw, attacking the people with an opposing view rather than their argument, "it is curious to observe such a few mention the negative impact of rising oil prices on food production and transportation prices. Such behaviour is neither neutral nor unbiased. It offends me to see fingers pointed at clean energy from biofuels – fingers dirty with oil and coal" (Silva, 3rd June 2008). In addition to this, Silva makes many claims and draws several conclusions with insufficient evidence, if any. Silva claims that "there are other critics who raise the senseless argument that Brazil's sugar-cane plantations are invading the Amazon" yet gives no reasons whatsoever to support this. Furthermore, Silva draws the general conclusion that "[biofuels] can play an important role in the economic and social development of the poorest countries" (Silva, 3rd June 2008) from merely the one case (Brazil) and therefore we cannot be at all certain of the validity of this conclusion. Also, Silva fails to observe the other relevant evidence when claiming that biofuels have been beneficial to the economy in Brazil. Although he states that poverty and hunger has dropped in Brazil after biofuel production increased, he fails to recognise that crop production has also increased and this could be responsible for the improvements. Finally, and most importantly, Silva has vast amounts of vested interest. Brazil is one of the major US suppliers of ethanol for biofuels and therefore stands to make huge amounts of profit from its production. Thus it is extremely likely that Silva would defend biofuels (regardless of how unjustly) to ensure the current demand remains. Therefore, Silva's argument is extremely unreliable and his conclusion can almost be treated as invalid as there is little evidence to support it and the argument put forward is greatly flawed.

So in conclusion, I believe that biofuels are a contributing factor to the international food crisis. However, from the sources I have analyzed, the situation appears to be present regardless of biofuels, as there are many other issues causing it such as an increase in demand. Yet it is the case that the growing demand for biofuels is worsening the situation, by reducing the amount of land used for food and thus putting further strain on the existing agriculture. Which is causing the current food crisis in a less direct fashion. Considering the weakness of Silva's argument, there is little opposition to this notion that biofuels are a major cause of the crisis and therefore it is very difficult not to realise that this is the case. However, how avoidable the production of biofuels is could have an effect on the measures taken to solve the international food crisis.

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