

- D** But the costs to society can actually be quantified and, when added up, can amount to staggering sums. A remarkable exercise in doing this has been carried out by one of the world's leading thinkers on the future of agriculture, Professor Jules Pretty, Director of the Centre for Environment and Society at the University of Essex. Professor Pretty and his colleagues calculated the externalities of British agriculture for one particular year. They added up the costs of repairing the damage it caused, and came up with a total figure of £2,343m. This is equivalent to £208 for every hectare of arable land and permanent pasture, almost as much again as the total government and EU spend on British farming in that year. And according to Professor Pretty, it was a conservative estimate.
- E** The costs included: £120m for removal of pesticides; £16m for removal of nitrates; £55m for removal of phosphates and soil; £23m for the removal of the bug cryptosporidium from drinking water by water companies; £125m for damage to wildlife habitats, hedgerows and dry stone walls; £1,113m from emissions of gases likely to contribute to climate change; £106m from soil erosion and organic carbon losses; £169m from food poisoning; and £607m from cattle disease. Professor Pretty draws a simple but memorable conclusion from all this: our food bills are actually threefold. We are paying for our supposedly cheaper food in three separate ways: once over the counter, secondly through our taxes, which provide the enormous subsidies propping up modern intensive farming, and thirdly to clean up the mess that modern farming leaves behind.
- F** So can the true cost of food be brought down? Breaking away from industrial agriculture as the solution to hunger may be very hard for some countries, but in Britain, where the immediate need to supply food is less urgent, and the costs and the damage of intensive farming have been clearly seen, it may be more feasible. The government needs to create sustainable, competitive and diverse farming and food sectors, which will contribute to a thriving and sustainable rural economy, and advance environmental, economic, health, and animal welfare goals.
- G** But if industrial agriculture is to be replaced, what is a viable alternative? Professor Pretty feels that organic farming would be too big a jump in thinking and in practices for many farmers. Furthermore, the price premium would put the produce out of reach of many poorer consumers. He is recommending the immediate introduction of a 'Greener Food Standard', which would push the market towards more sustainable environmental practices than the current norm, while not requiring the full commitment to organic production. Such a standard would comprise agreed practices for different kinds of farming, covering agrochemical use, soil health, land management, water and energy use, food safety and animal health. It could go a long way, he says, to shifting consumers as well as farmers towards a more sustainable system of agriculture.