

Introduction: Ethics and the Future of the Global Food System

Madison Powers

The coming decades will present an immense challenge for the planet: sustainably feeding nearly ten billion people that are expected to be alive by 2050. This is no small task, and one that intersects with climate change, geopolitics, the increased globalization of agricultural markets, and the emergence of new technologies. The world faces a challenge of increased demand, propelled by an expanding world population and a global shift in dietary patterns toward more resource-intensive foods. Moreover, changes in demand occur in the context of declining soil fertility and freshwater availability, agriculture's growing contribution to water pollution and climate change, and the emerging threats to agricultural productivity caused by climate disruption.

The confluence of multiple challenges has prompted numerous assessment reports prepared by individual countries, agencies under the auspices of the United Nations, and expert panels of scholars. For the most part, these discussions have been limited in their treatment of ethical issues and questions of social justice, concentrating instead on technological and logistical impediments to feeding the world by midcentury. Among the chief concerns are better access to markets, improved agricultural inputs (such as fertilizers and pesticides), strategies for technology transfer to less developed nations, options for reducing food waste, and the development of new crops that are resistant to the heat and drought expected from climate change.

The essays in this roundtable aim to shift the conversation toward normative issues, including the fair distribution of benefits and burdens, the ethical implications of the power differentials in existing patterns of market organization, and

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geopolitical-bargaining imbalances in the creation of trade rules and agricultural standards.

For example, the needs for better seeds, more resilient crops, and access to technology are common themes in the existing literature. Concerns about the health and environmental impacts of biotechnology and the current state of scientific knowledge are routine topics, but questions about the distributive implications and power asymmetries associated with their ownership and control are often sidelined. In his contribution to the roundtable, Paul Thompson explores the impacts of existing business models and intellectual property regimes on smallholders and farm communities, as well as the availability of healthy consumer choices.

Another prominent theme in the existing literature is the need to increase food production, typically accompanied by a nod to the importance of improving both large-scale production techniques and agroecology. Questions about the environmental sustainability of the former approach and the capacity of the latter approach to produce the necessary yields are commonplace. However, there is scant attention to issues of power and control over the crops that are produced, the conditions of their cultivation, and the balance between diversified production for domestic food security and staple crops for export. Yashar Saghai's essay brings together issues of the locus of control raised by proponents of the food sovereignty movement and the work of scholars developing models that project future needs and assess the feasibility of alternative solutions.

While most of the discussions of the future of agriculture raise concerns about the environmental and public health implications of meat production, far less attention is given to the distributive impacts of processing practices and the conversion of farmland from food to feed production on workers, wages, and household food security, especially in the Global South. Moreover, many discussions of food security pay insufficient attention to the range of nutritional challenges, only stressing the importance of increasing caloric intake in order to end hunger. Anne Barnhill and Jessica Fanzo take up these topics, and they end their essay with suggestions about the potential role of consumers in driving food system change that political institutions appear unwilling or unable to achieve.

While many existing assessments of the current system of agricultural production focus on the challenges posed by the rapid globalization of markets—from seed to shelf—most of the recommendations focus on the need to help smallholders gain access to global markets. Far less attention is paid to the role that existing

market practices play in generating or exacerbating environmental harms and unfairly altering the power dynamics between farmers, nation-states, and multinational corporations. Mark Budolfson's essay explores the prospects for addressing these issues through a model that he calls "well-regulated capitalism," arguing against critics who claim that injustice and unsustainability are inherent features of market-based food production systems. In my essay, by contrast, I focus on some problems created by the globalization of agricultural markets, and I suggest the need for changes at the international level, positing that food security and related issues be moved to the center of the human rights agenda, coupled with institutional changes to facilitate their enforcement.

Although the essays in this volume differ in the problems they identify and their practical prescriptions, they share a commitment to bringing ethical issues to the forefront of discussions about the future of the global system of agriculture.