

There's more to feeding the world than high yielding commodity crops

Since the food price spikes of 2007-8, global hands have been wringing over the question, how will we feed the world? Population keeps growing, food-producing resources like land and water become more scarce, climate change introduces a dramatic uncertainty. Increasing the industrial production of agricultural commodities does almost nothing for these people. Oddly enough, it can even make them hungrier.

The conceit that first-world farmers feed the hungry is just that: conceited. What industrialized agriculture produces are agricultural commodities that serve as raw materials—occasionally as food, often as animal feed. It produces a lot of those raw materials, and the output has a lot to do with international prices for food commodities.

But the volume of that production has very little to do with whether the hungry are fed. By some estimates, we currently grow enough food today to feed ten billion people, more than the projected global population in 2050. The hungry are hungry not because there isn't enough food but because they don't have the incomes to buy it. Or to grow it. An estimated [70% of the hungry](#) in the world today live in rural areas.

They can end up hungrier because of higher production of agricultural commodities. Cheap, industrialized rice or corn comes as a double-edged sword. If the farmers have any cash, lower prices mean they can afford more food. But if they grow these same crops, the prices they can get for their own rice or corn are lower thanks to the international competition. So they have less cash.

Studies have shown that high crop prices are better for the rural poor, even if they drive up the cost of food. Why? Money flows to the domestic agricultural economy, spurring investment, creating jobs, and raising wages.

Direct investments in improving smallholders' farm production, using sustainable and appropriate technologies, are precisely what are needed if "we" want to feed "the world." This has always been the [first and most important step toward economic development for agricultural societies](#). It worked for China. It worked for South Korea. It's working for Vietnam, which has become a global rice exporter thanks to public investments in smallholder rice production.

Read full original article: Feeding the World: The Ultimate First-World Conceit