A healthier, smarter food system

By Mark Muller

The alarming rise in obesity and other food-related health concerns have become a regular topic in the media. Public health organizations are asking some very good questions—do food and agricultural policies contribute to the proliferation of unhealthy foods in our stores and restaurants? And why are corn and soybeans, which provide a large percentage of U.S. sweeteners and oils, so much cheaper than healthier crops like fruits and vegetables? The answer is fairly simple—because food companies and the folks in Washington want it that way.

Cheap corn and soybeans and higher priced fruits and vegetables are a direct consequence of U.S. agriculture policy over the past 30 years. And government food pricing data clearly demonstrates the end result. Since 1985, the real price of fresh fruits and vegetables has increased nearly 40 percent, while the real price of sweets, fats and oils, and soft drinks has dropped. With these price signals, is it any wonder people are not eating enough produce and too many calorie-dense foods? We have made consuming junk food an economically smart choice, particularly for people with limited income.

Rural communities have been hit hard by U.S. agriculture policy, as we’ve steadily lost farmers and those who continue rely largely on off-farm income to keep farming. Our public health has suffered as well. The extensive use of cheap commodities in food products has resulted in added sugars and fats that fall into the very dietary categories linked to obesity. High fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oils—products that did not even exist a few generations ago but now are hard to avoid—have proliferated thanks to artificially cheap corn and soybeans.

Fortunately, a healthier food system and one that fairly rewards farmers is possible, if we shift to a smarter food and agriculture policy. We need to level the playing field for healthy foods by promoting agricultural markets that return fair prices to farmers. Throughout history, agricultural markets have always gone through price extremes, due to issues such as droughts, floods, pests, wars, and excessive production. The large number of variables that impact agricultural production create much greater market volatility than for television manufacturers,
for example. The problem with this volatility is that prices that are too high contribute to hunger, and prices that are too low drive farmers out of business and increases reliance on food imports, a national security issue.

U.S. farm policies that maintained fair prices for farmers and grain reserves for food security were ravaged in the 1970s, and completely eliminated in the 1996 farm bill. Since the 1970s real prices for corn and soybeans have been cut in half, and in many cases plunged below even what it costs for farmers to produce. The food industry uses its unfettered clout to sell reasonably priced food to consumers by paying absurdly low prices to farmers. The fast food industry has developed this business model to near perfection, selling corn and soybean-fed beef and chicken, corn-syrup sweetened colas, and soybean oil-fried french fries.

How do we break this cycle? First of all, we need to provide farmers with adequate incentives to grow substantially more crops like fruits and vegetables and grass-fed meat and dairy. Currently, it is difficult for a farmer in the rural Midwest to find markets for non-traditional grain and oilseed crops. Amazingly, products like apples are often cheaper coming from other parts of the world than they are from our own region. These healthier crops are short-changed when it comes to public research, government-funded market development, and farm income safety nets.

Second, we need to reverse the perverse incentives for the food industry to use excessive sweeteners and fats. The food industry has dictated government policies that create cheap ingredients for their food products. It works well from a stockholder’s perspective, but not for farmers, and not for public health. When thinking about what kind of food system we want, the livelihood of farmers and the health of our citizens should come first.

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