

Stop food insecurity from worsening

The global food supply crunch is worsening. Needless to say, the severe situation is compounded by the novel coronavirus pandemic, even though the virus outbreak itself has not directly triggered food supply shortages. The World Food Program has projected that economic stagnation caused by the coronavirus crisis will double the number of people facing food insecurity in the world to 270 million this year.

There are many food-related issues for which the world must deliver solutions in the years to come. One of them is how to secure food supplies in Africa and other regions with surging populations.

But population growth alone does not account for the ex-



INSIGHTS
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WORLD

By Hiroshi Watanabe

panding demand for food. Especially at the poorer end of the income spectrum, per capita income gains tend to cause a steep increase in food consumption. When corn and wheat are used to feed beef cattle, instead of for direct consumption by people, it results in inefficient production of food and the overall food supply needs to be increased.

It was once thought that the world would be able to overcome the food crisis, as such an event was considered to simply follow the pattern of population growth. But, in reality, multiple negative factors have simultaneously and rapidly emerged to aggravate the global food crunch. Taking a serious view of the worsening food supply situation, international organizations and governments around the world have been looking for solutions in various ways.

They have developed an array of ideas to help cope with a future food crisis. These include soy-derived meat alternatives that have the appearance and mouthfeel of genuine meat, as well as food containing euglena microbes and edible insect products.

Science-fiction depictions of the future sometimes include people dispensing with mealtimes, as they can get all their sustenance by popping a few nutrition pills. Even so, humankind will still face the need to grow and produce the food materials to be contained in the pills.

We need to work on a great variety of possible solutions to future food crises. I would like to focus on three of them now: first, food production enhancement and adequate food distribution; second, improved food storage and transportation; and third, food loss mitigation at the consumer level.

Food output enhancement

The first important thing is food production enhance-

ment. Especially when one thinks of the considerable population growth in Africa, it becomes obvious that agricultural development ought to be promoted in that region by, for example, utilizing the rivers that have so far been left largely unused.

Specifically, the abundant water in the Zambezi, the fourth-longest river in Africa, which rises in Zambia, southeast Africa, and flows through Mozambique to the Indian Ocean, should be efficiently and effectively used. If areas along the river are found to be suitable for irrigated wet-rice cultivation, international financial and technological cooperation should be provided to increase food production there. Japan is likely to be able to contribute much to such a project.

In the meantime, we must not allow a handful of businesses and countries to dominate and monopolize farmland and water, both of which are precious limited resources for humankind. The international community should embark on serious worldwide discussions on frameworks to prevent oligopolies from dominating such resources.

Currently, as there is no international entity responsible for regulations to ensure fair trade, it is difficult to forbid moves to monopolize food production and distribution. The international community is therefore tasked with devising an open platform for agricultural development and crop distribution as quickly as possible.

In connection with such international efforts, I would like to touch on what Japan has done and is doing.

The Japanese government refrained from utilizing certain portions of the country's arable land for many decades until it scrapped its policy of reducing rice cultivation acreage in fiscal 2018. The introduction of such a policy might be acceptable domestically insofar as it was seen and treated as an internal matter. However, I cannot help but to point out that the policy appears wrong when seen from a global perspective while the world's food security situations continued — and continue — to deteriorate.

The rice acreage curtailment policy was in place so long — for nearly half a century since it was introduced in 1970 — that it made Japanese farmers less motivated to pursue greater output, leading farmland productivity to decline. The upshot is that the acreage reduction policy was not necessarily the right judgment on the part of the government.

I also have to question the advisability of what is now being touted as a novel measure to facilitate the re-vamping of Japan's agricultural sector. Farmers are being encouraged to tap high-end markets abroad by

focusing on growing high-quality, high value-added farm produce. I am of the opinion that farmers and agri-business corporations should rather expand their business overseas to support the cultivation of grains and other crops consumed there.

Some people are skeptical about the future of rice cultivation. True, there are people who have become so familiar with bread made from wheat flour that they say bread made from rice flour does not agree with them. But those who suffer from chronic food insecurity are unlikely to decline noodles and bread made from rice flour.

In Japan, too, an increasing number of organizations are now providing free meals to children deprived of access to adequate food at home because of poverty and other problems. Such campaigns should be extended beyond the nation's boundaries.

Some people may say, "While much remains to be done in Japan to rescue children from hunger, we need not involve ourselves in overseas campaigns." However, international people-to-people relationships are rapidly getting closer, and citizens on this planet will have to become more

sensitive to deaths from starvation in their neighboring countries.

Part of the tragedy of hunger is that it leaves people less capable of preventing the spread of diseases. Against this background, locations suffering from hunger are more vulnerable to prolonged epidemics, resulting in the spread of illness to wider areas. It is

unfortunate that hunger, and the extremist ideologies that can gain a foothold in impoverished circumstances, have led to an increase in the number of hunger-afflicted people choosing to take part in international terror attacks.

The time has come for the world to think over what it should specifically do to deal with the structural global problem of hunger, with a view to creating a safe living environment that is sustainable beyond national boundaries.

Supply chain losses

The second theme is the need to reduce food losses at the supply chain level, including distribution channels and processing facilities.

Food supply shortages occur not only due to insufficient food production but also because of inefficient distribution networks. In Africa and some other parts of the world, it is said that more than 10% of local grain and other crops is lost on its way to points of consumption owing to inadequate storage and transportation facilities.

Storage facilities and transportation systems, such as

roads, railways and ports, need to be improved in those regions. The massive lack of funds to facilitate the improvement of the required infrastructure should not be neglected by the rest of the world.

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the meat supply chain in the United States, the world's largest producer of beef, causing meat shortages in large cities. The disruption was caused by the temporary closure of some major meat-packing plants where employees contracted the virus. If countries tighten border food quarantine control and general hygiene control because of the pandemic, food supplies may decrease and deliveries may be slowed.

To cope better with such new circumstances, countries will have to realize large-scale "local-production-for-local-consumption" food schemes by drastically revising the existing relevant systems. Despite being one of the world's most populous countries with more than 100 million people, Japan's food self-sufficiency rate is low. Given this fact, increasing locally produced food for local consumption can be said to be a critical medium-term issue for the country.

Mountains of wasted food

I have been pleased to see that efforts to decrease food waste at the consumer level have continued to receive major media coverage. According to the Advertising Council Japan, a public interest incorporated association better known as AC Japan, Japanese society's annual food losses currently amount to 6.43 million tons, or equivalent to one omusubi rice ball per capita per day. In other words, Japan is wasting about 100 million omusubi every day.

In Japan, a number of employee cafeterias have embarked on zero food loss initiatives requiring prior booking for every meal. It is not easy for all restaurants to immediately adopt a completely pre-booking business model. That said, they also should make every effort — including the use of artificial intelligence — to slash food waste. Indeed, there are many things that have to be done as soon as possible, including improving supply channels and processes and upgrading storage methods.

The country's convenience store chain operators deserve praise for offering to take the lead in reducing food losses.

People must eat every day. We must enable them to do so without causing supply disruptions. Therefore, all of us should use all of our ingenuity to address our common issue — the food supply crunch.

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