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Future of food: markets, prices, security

Moderator, **Joe Dewbre**, Senior Agriculture Policy Analyst, OECD, France

Mark Adams, Professor, University of Sydney, Australia

Linda Nghatsane, Chair, Nelspruit Agricultural Development Committee, South Africa

Timothy D. Searchinger, Research Scholar and Lecturer, Princeton University, United States

“The basic worry about food security is as old as man,” moderator **Joe Dewbre** said, opening the session on the Future of food: markets, prices, security. But some additional worries are new: the globalisation of the food commodity market, connections to financial markets, speculation and the impact of climate change on agriculture. Given these concerns, how can food security be guaranteed as the world’s population explodes? To what extent are poverty and hunger related? How will climate change affect food security?

Mark Adams offered a technical analysis of agricultural production, saying that there have been significant gains in yields over the past decades.. However, he warned that maintaining this yield growth will no longer be sustainable. “Yield is now close to optimum in many areas,” he said. “There *are* limits to growth. It would be very unusual for us to sustain that productivity for long periods without adversely affecting ecosystems.” Science and technology will help in adapting plant species to “optimise water and soil efficiency”. “Water will determine how successful we are in maintaining productivity,” he said.

A self-described “small-scale farmer”, **Linda Nghatsane** recognised food as a basic human need—and a right. She said that sustainable food security could be ensured through clear rules, strong institutions and the empowerment of women. Food security is best protected by a combination of the free market and normal price mechanisms: the former would encourage investment and provide access to resources, the latter would balance food supply and demand. “There is room for new technologies to play a great role in food security,” Ms Nghatsane said, “but new technologies, alone, cannot have a direct impact. Women should be at the centre of policy-making and implementation.”

Timothy D. Searchinger focused on biofuels and how they affect food security. Productive agricultural lands are being used to produce biofuels instead of food. Meanwhile, emissions from biofuels are exempt when calculating carbon emissions according to international standards. “It is hard to believe that stupid accounting errors can cause such grave hardship except that stupid accounting errors have caused the

financial crisis that led to the economic crisis,” he said. “We need to get the accounting rules right; nothing is more important.”

Two members of the audience, one from Uganda and one from Brazil, stressed that in their countries, biofuel production does not use prime agricultural land and does not result in deforestation.

A professor of economics at the University of Bamako, Mali, added that there is not only an accounting problem with biofuels, but there is a subsidy problem. Subsidies for biofuels in developed countries disadvantage agriculture in developing countries. According to the speaker, worldwide regulation is needed to redress this issue.

A member of the audience asked about the relationship between urbanisation and food security. Mr Adams called urbanisation “one of the greatest threats to agriculture”. “The urban mindset no longer has a connection with the land. When people in cities don’t know what it takes to produce their food, they have a poor appreciation of agriculture.” Mr Searchinger added that there are “two separate challenges”: hunger in cities and hunger in rural areas. “In cities, the issue is the price of food. In rural areas, the issue is the lack of support for agriculture,” he said.

There was a brief exchange about whether speculation on commodity prices contributed to spikes in food prices over the past few years, but according to Mr Dewbre “the jury is out” on that question.

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