

Lessons from the Green Revolution

by Peter Rosset, Joseph Collins, and Frances Moore Lappé, *Tikkun Magazine*, March/April 2000

Do We Need New Technology to End Hunger?

Faced with an estimated 786 million hungry people in the world, cheerleaders for our social order have an easy solution: we will grow more food through the magic of chemicals and genetic engineering. For those who remember the original "Green Revolution" promise to end hunger through miracle seeds, this call for "Green Revolution II" should ring hollow.

Faced with an estimated 786 million hungry people in the world, cheerleaders for our social order have an easy solution: we will grow more food through the magic of chemicals and genetic engineering. For those who remember the original "Green Revolution" promise to end hunger through miracle seeds, this call for "Green Revolution II" should ring hollow. Yet Monsanto, Novartis, AgrEvo, DuPont, and other chemical companies who are reinventing themselves as biotechnology companies, together with the World Bank and other international agencies, would have the world's anti-hunger energies aimed down the path of more agrochemicals and genetically modified crops. This second Green Revolution, they tell us, will save the world from hunger and starvation if we just allow these various companies, spurred by the free market, to do their magic.

The Green Revolution myth goes like this: the miracle seeds of the Green Revolution increase grain yields and therefore are a key to ending world hunger. Higher yields mean more income for poor farmers, helping them to climb out of poverty, and more food means less hunger. Dealing with the root causes of poverty that contribute to hunger takes a very long time and people are starving now. So we must do what we can-increase production. The Green Revolution buys the time Third World countries desperately need to deal with the underlying social causes of poverty and to cut birth rates. In any case, outsiders-like the scientists and policy advisers behind the Green Revolution-can't tell a poor country to reform its economic and political system, but they can contribute invaluable expertise in food production. While the first Green Revolution may have missed poorer areas with more marginal lands, we can learn valuable lessons from that experience to help launch a second Green Revolution to defeat hunger once and for all.

Improving seeds through experimentation is what people have been up to since the beginning of agriculture, but the term "Green Revolution" was coined in the 1960s to highlight a particularly striking breakthrough. In test plots in northwest Mexico, improved varieties of wheat dramatically increased yields. Much of the reason why these "modern varieties" produced more than traditional varieties was that they were more responsive to controlled irrigation and to petrochemical fertilizers, allowing for much more efficient conversion of industrial inputs into food. With a big boost from the International Agricultural Research Centers created by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the "miracle" seeds quickly spread to Asia, and soon new strains of rice and corn were developed as well.

By the 1970s, the term "revolution" was well deserved, for the new seeds-accompanied by chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and, for the most part, irrigation-had replaced the traditional farming practices of millions of Third World farmers. By the 1990s, almost 75 percent of Asian rice areas were sown with these new varieties. The same was true for almost half of the wheat planted in Africa and more than half of that in Latin America and Asia, and about 70 percent of the world's corn as well. Overall, it was estimated that 40 percent of all farmers in the Third World were using Green Revolution seeds, with the greatest use found in Asia, followed by Latin America.

Clearly, the production advances of the Green Revolution are no myth. Thanks to the new seeds, tens of millions of extra tons of grain a year are being harvested. But has the Green Revolution actually proven itself a successful strategy for ending hunger? Not really.

Narrowly focusing on increasing production-as the Green Revolution does-cannot alleviate hunger because it fails to alter the tightly concentrated distribution of economic power, especially access to land and purchasing power. Even the World Bank concluded in a major 1986 study of world hunger that a rapid increase in food production does not necessarily result in food security-that is, less hunger. Current hunger can only be alleviated by "redistributing purchasing power and resources toward those who are undernourished," the study said. In a nutshell-if the poor don't have the money to buy food, increased production is not going to help them.

Introducing any new agricultural technology into a social system stacked in favor of the rich and against the poor-without addressing the social questions of access to the technology's benefits-will over time lead to an even greater concentration of the rewards from agriculture, as is happening in the United States.

Because the Green Revolution approach does nothing to address the insecurity that lies at the root of high birth rates-and can even heighten that insecurity-it cannot buy time until population growth slows. Finally, a narrow focus on production ultimately defeats itself as it destroys the very resource base on which agriculture depends. We've come to see that without a strategy for change that addresses the powerlessness of the poor, the tragic result will be more food and yet more hunger.

More Food and Yet More Hunger?

Despite three decades of rapidly expanding global food supplies, there are still an estimated 786 million hungry people in the world in the 1990s. Where are these 786 million hungry people? Since the early 1980s, media representations of famines in Africa have awakened Westerners to hunger there, but Africa represents less than one-quarter of the hunger in the world today. We are made blind to the day-in-day-out hunger suffered by hundreds of millions more. For example, by the mid-1980s, newspaper headlines were applauding the Asian success stories-India and Indonesia, we were told, had become "self-sufficient in food" or even "food exporters." But it is in Asia, precisely where Green Revolution seeds have contributed to the greatest production success, that roughly two-thirds of the undernourished in the entire world live.

According to *Business Week* magazine, "even though Indian granaries are overflowing now," thanks to the success of the Green Revolution in raising wheat and rice yields, "5,000 children die each day of malnutrition. One-third of India's 900 million people are poverty-stricken." Since the poor can't afford to buy what is produced, "the government is left trying to store millions of tons of foods. Some is rotting, and there is concern that rotten grain will find its way to public markets." The article concludes that the Green Revolution may have reduced India's grain imports substantially, but did not have a similar impact on hunger.

Such analysis raises serious questions about the number of hungry people in the world in 1970 versus 1990, spanning the two decades of major Green Revolution advances. At first glance, it looks as though great progress was made, with food production up and hunger down. The total food available per person in the world rose by 11 percent over those two decades, while the estimated number of hungry people fell from 942 million to 786 million, a 16 percent drop. This was apparent progress, for which those behind the Green Revolution were understandably happy to take the credit.

But these figures merit a closer look. If you eliminate China from the analysis, the number of hungry people in the rest of the world actually increased by more than 11 percent, from 536 to 597 million. In South America, for example, while per capita food supplies rose almost 8 percent, the number of hungry people also went up, by 19 percent. In south Asia, there was 9 percent more food per person by 1990, but there were also 9 percent more hungry people. Nor was it increased population that made for more hungry people. The total food available per person actually increased. What made possible greater hunger was the failure to address unequal access to food and food-producing resources.

The remarkable difference in China, where the number of hungry dropped from 406 million to 189 million, almost begs the question: which has been more effective at reducing hunger-the Green Revolution or the Chinese Revolution, where broad-based changes in access to land paved the way for rising living standards?

Whether the Green Revolution or any other strategy to boost food production will alleviate hunger depends on the economic, political, and cultural rules that people make. These rules determine who benefits as a supplier of the increased production—whose land and crops prosper and for whose profit—and who benefits as a consumer of the increased production—who gets the food and at what price.

The poor pay more and get less. Poor farmers can't afford to buy fertilizer and other inputs in volume; big growers can get discounts for large purchases. Poor farmers can't hold out for the best price for their crops, as can larger farmers whose circumstances are far less desperate. In much of the world, water is the limiting factor in farming success, and irrigation is often out of the reach of the poor. Canal irrigation favors those near the top of the flow. Tubewells, often promoted by development agencies, favor the bigger operators, who can better afford the initial investment and have lower costs per unit. Credit is also critical. It is common for small farmers to depend on local moneylenders and pay interest rates several times as high as wealthier farmers. Government-subsidized credit overwhelmingly benefits the big farmers. Most of all, the poor lack clout. They can't command the subsidies and other government favors accruing to the rich.

With the Green Revolution, farming becomes petro-dependent. Some of the more recently developed seeds may produce higher yields even without manufactured inputs, but the best results require the right amounts of chemical fertilizer, pesticides, and water. So as the new seeds spread, petrochemicals become part of farming. In India, adoption of the new seeds has been accompanied by a sixfold rise in fertilizer use per acre. Yet the quantity of agricultural production per ton of fertilizer used in India dropped by two-thirds during the Green Revolution years. In fact, over the past thirty years the annual growth of fertilizer use on Asian rice has been from three to forty times faster than the growth of rice yields.

Because farming methods that depend heavily on chemical fertilizers do not maintain the soil's natural fertility and because pesticides generate resistant pests, farmers need ever more fertilizers and pesticides just to achieve the same results. At the same time, those who profit from the increased use of fertilizers and pesticides fear labor organizing and use their new wealth to buy tractors and other machines, even though they are not required by the new seeds. This incremental shift leads to the industrialization of farming.

Once on the path of industrial agriculture, farming costs more. It can be more profitable, of course, but only if the prices farmers get for their crops stay ahead of the costs of petrochemicals and machinery. Green Revolution proponents claim increases in net incomes from farms of all sizes once farmers adopt the more responsive seeds. But recent studies also show another trend: outlays for fertilizers and pesticides may be going up faster than yields, suggesting that Green Revolution farmers are now facing what U.S. farmers have experienced for decades—a cost-price squeeze.

In Central Luzon, Philippines, rice yield increased 13 percent during the 1980s, but came at the cost of a 21 percent increase in fertilizer use. In the Central Plains, yields went up only 6.5 percent, while fertilizer use rose 24 percent and pesticides jumped by 53 percent. In West Java, a 23 percent yield increase was virtually canceled by 65 and 69 percent increases in fertilizers and pesticides respectively.

To anyone following farm news here at home, these reports have a painfully familiar ring—and why wouldn't they? After all, the United States—not Mexico—is the true birthplace of the Green Revolution. Improved seeds combined with chemical fertilizers and pesticides have pushed corn yields up nearly three-fold since 1950, with smaller but still significant gains for wheat, rice, and soybeans. Since World War II, as larger harvests have pushed down the prices farmers get for their crops while the costs of farming have shot up, farmers' profit margins have been drastically narrowed. By the early 1990s, production costs had risen from about half to over 80 percent of gross farm income. So who survives today? Two very different groups: those few farmers who chose not to buy into industrialized agriculture and those able to keep expanding their acreage to make up for their lower per acre profit. Among this second select group are the top 1.2 percent of farms by income, those with \$500,000 or more in yearly sales, dubbed "superfarms" by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 1969, the superfarms earned 16 percent of net farm income; by the late 1980s, they garnered nearly 40 percent.

Superfarms triumph not because they are more efficient food producers or because the Green Revolution technology itself favored them, but because of advantages that accrue to wealth and size. They have the capital to invest and the volume necessary to stay afloat even if profits per unit shrink. They have the political clout to shape tax policies in their favor. Over time, why should we expect the result of the cost-price squeeze to be any different in the Third World? In the United States, we've seen the number of farms drop by two-thirds and average farm size more than double since World War II. The gutting of rural communities, the creation of inner-city slums, and the exacerbation of unemployment all followed in the wake of this vast migration from the land. Think what the equivalent rural exodus means in the Third World, where the number of jobless people is already double or triple our own.

Not Ecologically Sustainable

There is also growing evidence that Green Revolution-style farming is not ecologically sustainable, even for large farmers. In the 1990s, Green Revolution researchers themselves sounded the alarm about a disturbing trend that had only just come to light. After achieving dramatic increases in the early stages of the technological transformation, yields began falling in a number of Green Revolution areas. In Central Luzon, Philippines, rice yields grew steadily during the 1970s, peaked in the early 1980s, and have been dropping gradually ever since. Long-term experiments conducted by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in both Central Luzon and Laguna Province confirm these results. Similar patterns have now been observed for rice-wheat systems in India and Nepal. The causes of this phenomenon have to do with forms of long-term soil degradation that are still poorly understood by scientists. An Indian farmer told *Business Week* his story:

Dyal Singh knows that the soil on his 3.3-hectare [8 acre] farm in Punjab is becoming less fertile. So far, it hasn't hurt his harvest of wheat and corn. "There will be a great problem after 5 or 10 years," says the 63-year-old Sikh farmer. Years of using high-yield seeds that require heavy irrigation and chemical fertilizers have taken their toll on much of India's farmland. So far, 6 percent of agricultural land has been rendered useless.

Where yields are not actually declining, the rate of growth is slowing rapidly or leveling off, as has now been documented in China, North Korea, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

The Green Revolution: Some Lessons

Having seen food production advance while hunger widens, we are now prepared to ask: under what conditions are greater harvests doomed to failure in eliminating hunger? First, where farmland is bought and sold like any other commodity and society allows the unlimited accumulation of farmland by a few, superfarms replace family farms and all of society suffers. Second, where the main producers of food—small farmers and farm workers—lack bargaining power relative to suppliers of farm inputs and food marketers, producers get a shrinking share of the rewards from farming. Third, where dominant technology destroys the very basis for future production, by degrading the soil and generating pest and weed problems, it becomes increasingly difficult and costly to sustain yields.

Under these three conditions, mountains of additional food could not eliminate hunger, as hunger in America should never let us forget. The alternative is to create a viable and productive small farm agriculture using the principles of agroecology. That is the only model with the potential to end rural poverty, feed everyone, and protect the environment and the productivity of the land for future generations.

Successful Examples

That sounds good, but has it ever worked? From the United States to India, alternative agriculture is proving itself viable. In the United States, a landmark study by the prestigious National Research Council found that "alternative farmers often produce high per acre yields with significant reductions in costs per unit of crop harvested," despite the fact that "many federal policies discourage adoption of alternative practices." The Council concluded that "Federal commodity programs must be restructured to help farmers realize the full benefits of the productivity gains possible through alternative practices."

In South India, a 1993 study was carried out to compare “ecological farms” with matched “conventional” or chemical-intensive farms. The study’s author found that the ecological farms were just as productive and profitable as the chemical ones. He concluded that if extrapolated nationally, ecological farming would have “no negative impact on food security,” and would reduce soil erosion and the depletion of soil fertility while greatly lessening dependence on external inputs.

But Cuba is where alternative agriculture has been put to its greatest test. Changes underway in that island nation since the collapse of trade with the former socialist bloc provide evidence that the alternative approach can work on a large scale. Before 1989, Cuba was a model Green Revolution-style farm economy, based on enormous production units, using vast quantities of imported chemicals and machinery to produce export crops, while over half of the island’s food was imported. Although the government’s commitment to equity, as well as favorable terms of trade offered by Eastern Europe, meant that Cubans were not undernourished, the underlying vulnerability of this style of farming was exposed when the collapse of the socialist bloc joined the already existing and soon to be tightened U.S. trade embargo.

Cuba was plunged into the worst food crisis in its history, with consumption of calories and protein dropping by perhaps as much as 30 percent. Nevertheless, by 1997, Cubans were eating almost as well as they did before 1989, yet comparatively little food and agrochemicals were being imported. What happened?

Faced with the impossibility of importing either food or agrochemical inputs, Cuba turned inward to create a more self-reliant agriculture based on higher crop prices to farmers, agroecological technology, smaller production units, and urban agriculture. The combination of a trade embargo, food shortages, and the opening of farmers’ markets meant that farmers began to receive much better prices for their products. Given this incentive to produce, they did so, even in the absence of Green Revolution-style inputs. They were given a huge boost by the reorientation of government education, research, and extension toward alternative methods, as well as the rediscovery of traditional farming techniques.

As small farmers and cooperatives responded by increasing production while large-scale state farms stagnated and faced plunging yields, the government initiated the newest phase of revolutionary land reform, parceling out the state farms to their former employees as smaller-scale production units. Finally, the government mobilized support for a growing urban agriculture movement—small-scale organic farming on vacant lots—which, together with the other changes, transformed Cuban cities and urban diets in just a few years.

The Cuban experience tells us that we can feed a nation’s people with a small-farm model based on agroecological technology, and in so doing we can become more self-reliant in food production. A key lesson is that when farmers receive fairer prices, they produce, with or without Green Revolution seed and chemical inputs. If these expensive and noxious inputs are unnecessary, then we can dispense with them.

The Bottom Line

In the final analysis, if the history of the Green Revolution has taught us one thing, it is that increased food production can—and often does—go hand in hand with greater hunger. If the very basis of staying competitive in farming is buying expensive inputs, then wealthier farmers will inexorably win out over the poor, who are unlikely to find adequate employment to compensate for the loss of farming livelihoods. Hunger is not caused by a shortage of food, and cannot be eliminated by producing more.

This is why we must be skeptical when Monsanto, DuPont, Novartis, and other chemical-cum-biotechnology companies tell us that genetic engineering will boost crop yields and feed the hungry. The technologies they push have dubious benefits and well-documented risks, and the second Green Revolution they promise is no more likely to end hunger than the first.

Far too many people do not have access to the food that is already available because of deep and growing inequality. If agriculture can play any role in alleviating hunger, it will only be to the extent that the bias toward wealthier and larger farmers is reversed through pro-poor alternatives like land reform and sustainable agriculture, which reduce inequality and make small farmers the center of an economically vibrant rural economy.

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