



# Feeding Frenzy: Land Grabs, Price Spikes, and the World Food Crisis

By Paul McMahon

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**Feeding Frenzy: Land Grabs, Price Spikes, and the World Food Crisis** By Paul McMahon

*Feeding Frenzy* traces the history of the global food system and reveals the underlying causes of recent turmoil in food markets. Supplies are running short, prices keep spiking, and the media is full of talk of a world food crisis. The turmoil has unleashed some dangerous forces. Food-producing countries are banning exports even if this means starving their neighbors. Governments and corporations are scrambling to secure control of food supply chains. Powerful groups from the Middle East and Asia are acquiring farmland in poor countries to grow food for export — what some call land grabs. This raises some big questions. Can we continue to feed a burgeoning population? Are we running out of land and water? Can we rely on free markets to provide? This book reveals trends that could lead to more hunger and conflict. But Paul McMahon also outlines actions that can be taken to shape a sustainable and just food system.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“McMahon... has written an illuminating history that culminates in the current scramble to secure control of farmland... Yet McMahon’s answer to what he calls the ‘nine billion person question’ tips towards the optimistic.” —Financial Times

“Paul McMahon’s [Feeding Frenzy] is a straight food apocalypse book, no jokes, one recipe: a four-ingredient plan to feed the planet.” —Guardian

“Passionately argued... presents a compelling argument for radical agricultural reforms... Above all, [McMahon] is optimistic about the future, putting faith in our ability to overcome obstacles.” —Sunday Times

“Revealing... offers refreshingly ordinary answers.” —Observer

#### About the Author

Born in Ireland, **Paul McMahon** holds a Ph.D from Cambridge University and has authored reports on sustainable food systems as an advisor to The Prince of Wales’s International Sustainability Unit and to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. He cofounded and now helps run SLM Partners, a business that invests in sustainable agriculture in Australia and across the world. He lives in London.

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A gleaming steel fence is going up in a remote part of Africa. An alien construction, it dissects a landscape of open fields, mud huts and dirt tracks, where straight lines are elusive. On one side, diesel-powered tractors chew up the soil, containers packed with seed and fertiliser wait to be opened, and foreign managers look forward to a bumper harvest. On the other side, a local farmer in a tattered shirt scratches at the soil with a simple hoe, fearing that he may not be able to grow enough food for his family. Villagers cluster around the gate to the property, looking for work but muttering that the land rightly belongs to them. There are rumours that the young men are arming themselves so they can resist what they regard as a foreign ‘land grab’.

This story is playing out on the western fringes of Ethiopia, in a steamy region close to the border with South Sudan. The land has been acquired by a billionaire sheikh as part of an initiative launched by the Saudi government, which wants to grow more of its food abroad. Ethiopia, like most of Africa,

may be better known for food scarcity and famine, rather than food abundance and exports, but this is one of dozens of similar projects to be launched across the continent since 2008.

The appearance of steel fences and satellite-guided tractors in one of the poorest parts of the world is a direct result of the turmoil that has gripped global food markets over the past five years. Food prices more than doubled between 2007 and 2008. Grain stocks fell to a dangerous level, and there were fears that supplies would not be available at any price. After a brief dip, prices rebounded in 2010 and jumped again in 2012. Food is a lot more expensive than a decade ago and does not look like getting any cheaper. We seem to be stuck in a never-ending food crisis. Everyone can see the effect in their supermarket and restaurant bills. Higher food prices squeeze our incomes, meaning there is less to spend on everything else. But for the poor of the world the impacts are more dramatic. About one in eight people now go hungry each year. Millions of people have been forced deeper into poverty. High prices have sparked food riots and demonstrations in more than thirty countries. In January 2011 an iconic photograph emerged of a protester in Tunisia facing down riot police armed with nothing more than a baguette – a symbol of how anger over food helped spark the ‘Arab Spring’.

Ferment in food markets has been seized upon by professional doom-mongers who believe the human race is living beyond its means. ‘The Coming Famine’, ‘World on the Edge’, ‘Climate Change Peril’, ‘Peak Food’, ‘Peak Oil’, even ‘Peak Dirt’ – these are some of the ideas and book titles that have circulated in recent years, all warning of an impending food collapse. Malthus, the nineteenth-century prophet of population catastrophe, is back in fashion. And another controversial idea is re-emerging after a long period of stigmatisation – population control. Rich people in rich countries are once more telling poor people in poor countries to have fewer children.

There is no doubt that we are entering a challenging time. The human population will grow from 7 to 9 billion over the next forty years. Every year there are an extra 80 million mouths to feed. As the global middle class swells in size, people are demanding more expensive diets, which adds to the pressure on the planet’s resources. There is a question mark over the sustainability of modern agriculture because of its dependence on fossil fuels, the damage it inflicts on the environment and its vulnerability to a changing climate. Even the UK government’s chief scientist, Professor Sir John Beddington, has warned that ‘the food system is failing’.

Can we feed a world of 9 billion by 2050? Is the current market turmoil an early sign that the global food system will not cope?

This book tries to answer these questions. It describes how the global food system works today, highlighting the huge inequalities and imbalances that pervade it. It reveals the real reasons behind the recent increase in food prices, exploring issues such as the role of biofuels, climate change, financial speculation and the rise of the Asian consumer. It looks at how demand for food is likely to develop over the next forty years and investigates whether food supplies will be able to keep up.

At the most basic level, this means assessing the biophysical potential of our planet – the amount of land, water, energy and other natural resources that is available. It is a matter of hard science. But just because we can produce enough food does not mean that everyone will eat. Food security is determined not only by how much food is available but by whether people can access it and afford it. Therefore, the real answer will depend on the social, economic and political dimensions of the global food system. In particular the fate of millions of people will be determined by whether nations choose to compete or collaborate in a time of relative scarcity.

Judging by the response to the recent crisis, we are in for a period of intense competition. This book lifts the lid on the extraordinary scramble for food that is now taking place around the world. It reveals how countries are manipulating trade and hoarding agricultural surpluses, even if this starves their neighbours; how financial investors are distorting markets through their willingness to bet on anything; how private corporations are rushing to secure supply chains before their competitors can get there; and how a bizarre array of fortunehunters and policymakers are scrambling to acquire farmland in some of the poorest countries of the world, in ways that echo the colonialism of the past. Many people no longer trust markets to provide. Food has become a geopolitical issue of the highest importance.

If these trends continue, they could lead to a nightmare scenario of exploitation, hunger and conflict. But this book also maps out an alternative vision that could deliver better outcomes. It is a way forward that addresses the heated debates that often flare up in connection with the future of food and farming. It overcomes simple dichotomies such as organics versus genetic engineering, family farms versus large commercial estates, free trade versus government subsidies. It builds on the work of innovators all around the world who have

found ways to produce more food with fewer resources while generating wealth for farmers and consumers. Which path will the world choose? The answer will matter to politicians and generals, to farmers and investors, to consumers and citizens – and, not least, to the African farmers watching the steel fences go up around their land.

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