To Market, to Market

Cheap, imported meat that wound up in pig swill is the likely cause of the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the United Kingdom. The disease poses no real threat to humans, but the outbreak caused economic damage to the country's agricultural and tourist sector in the billions of pounds and interrupted the movement of livestock and people. Suddenly, the world was reminded just how fragile the global food chain is.

The World Trade Organization, nevertheless, is committed to encouraging the free movement of food. The global economy trumps national security and sustainable agriculture, not to mention secure livelihoods for the rural poor. Consolidation of the food chain has already increased the market power of agribusiness and put many small farmers out of business. Consumers need to realize that what seems cheap actually comes at a price, says Sophia Murphy at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. "We need to encourage local production of food, a balance of power among the actors in the food chain, and payment of the true costs of our food production," Murphy says.

Most Americans, at least, can count on more than ample supplies of food to pad their already ample girths. We also expect our food to be safe to eat. To that end, a number of federal agencies have evolved to cope with the possible threats of food-borne pathogens and residual pesticides. In fact, some 12 separate agencies have often-overlapping jurisdiction over various aspects of food safety, says Julie Caswell at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. These agencies have generally performed well, but consolidation into one agency might lead to increased efficiency and free up federal funds to target other health concerns such as obesity and poor nutrition, Caswell says.

Obesity is not a problem for 840 million people suffering from chronic malnourishment, however. For all the gains of the Green Revolution, poor people are increasingly being fed "dense packages of carbohydrates" from the byproducts of crops like corn with low nutritional value. Journalist Richard Manning, who spent 1998 and 1999 profiling nine research projects in the developing world, found that cutting-edge research on developing and growing more-nutritional crops rarely makes it beyond the lab. If we are to feed the world's hungry, we will need a new information revolution that brings the fruits of research directly to the farmer.

Cuba's isolation at the end of the Cold War has forced the country into an ambitious experiment in agricultural self-sufficiency. Food and oil embargoes made it essential to move agricultural production closer to cities. With imported chemical fertilizers and pesticides no longer available, city dwellers have adopted organic soil enrichment and pest control for their new urban gardens, and farmers have revived some traditional farming practices that nearly disappeared with industrial farming. Freelance writer Hugh Warwick says Cuba's experiment has demonstrated the benefits of sustainable agriculture. Yet it is not clear that the government has a firm commitment to organic farming and food self-sufficiency. When trade barriers fall, the country is likely to join the global farm and resume industrial-scale agriculture.

Like most of the European Union, Cuba is also leery of introducing genetically modified crops in the field, citing the precautionary principle. Indur Goklany takes a closer look at the principle, which errs on the side of caution, and finds there is more evidence in support of such crops than against them. New varieties of produce offer real and certain benefits, especially to the poor and undernourished. GM crops can reduce morbidity and mortality among the poor without harm to the environment. In fact, Goklany says, increased productivity and reduced chemical inputs would free up more land to benefit wildlife habitat, biological diversity, water quality, and climate.

The Editors