



Packaging is the answer to world hunger

More packaging and the right sort of packaging can help to curb world hunger!

Ever since World War II, global food production has increased faster than population growth, and food prices have remained relatively stable. Now, however, we are seeing a reversal of that trend – and we face a world food shortage. Populations are starving and food prices have risen dramatically. As a result, in many cases there is food but no money, or too much food in some places and too little food in other places.



The current food shortages have emerged quickly and with little warning. As always, several reasons are cited. The rising middle class in Asia and in other emerging markets with bigger purchasing power is one such reason, while another argument is the attractiveness and usage of food raw materials for other purposes such as cattle feed, fuels and materials. Some even say that the production of bio-plastics (plastics made from renewable raw materials) is prejudicial to food production. Crop failures, climate change, protective tariffs, and poor logistics are other factors that are said to affect global food supplies. Traditionally, such problems have been addressed by increasing land availability for agricultural use (through de-forestation), as well as plant breeding, artificial fertilisation, spraying, irrigation, etc, to increase yield per hectare. Genetically modified plants are also used, but the issue is controversial and many consumers are sceptical.

Now we face new and bigger challenges that will also require new solutions. Consumers want their food to be as natural as possible, minimising use of genetically modified plants, pesticides in production and limiting use of sugar and salt as a traditional means of preservation. Further de-forestation to create new farmland, could negatively affect the environment and the climate.

In order to cope with food shortages, a sharp increase in food availability is required by 2020 but such an increase need not mean a real increase in production. Large quantities of food are now wasted because of poor logistics, storage and packaging processes, as well as the lack of cold chain facilities. In some developing countries, it's estimated that as much as 50% of all food production is lost because of the scarcity of processing and packaging technology, while in industrialised countries, food is carelessly handled and between 25 and 50% is discarded because it has passed the 'best-before' date. Moreover, up to 10% of all fruit and vegetables shipped in the EU, worth some 10 billion euros, are destroyed. Enormous resources go into producing and transporting these goods which are lost partly because lack of adequate packaging.

This is one area where the global packaging industry can make a positive contribution to sustainability and fighting world hunger. The general public and politicians often see packaging as an environmental threat rather than a tool for sustainability. For instance, the usage of a few grams of plastic for packaging is often considered much worse than a kilogram of destroyed tomatoes, although the latter,

taking into account all processes in production and logistics, in most cases affects the environment much more than packaging material.

Although there are continuous calls for the use of less packaging, the solution to these problems is perhaps to use more. That means larger numbers of packaging for more uses, but of course combined with a continued packaging weight reduction through better technology and process development for each individual package. Ensuring that food produced in developing countries is effectively packaged would result in much larger quantities of food reaching the people. By adding adequate packaging, logistics and storage, yet more food could be delivered to those who most need it.

A high proportion of all drinks consumed in the world are unpacked. By packaging larger quantities of drinks, especially in developing countries, vital nutrients could reach more people, and diseases could be reduced through improved hygiene and food safety. The global packaging industry has provided solutions for many of these problems.

As in any other industry, there are failures, but overall the packaging industry has worked successfully to optimise packaging solutions over past decades. In the current tough economic climate, with enormous pressure on margins, packaging buyers won't pay one cent extra for something that isn't required to protect and promote their products.

While packaging cannot alone fully correct today's food shortages, it is an essential part of a long-term incremental process that will have to employ a blend of technologies and processes. It's true to say that the global packaging industry can contribute greatly to increased prosperity and sustainability in the world by ensuring that larger amounts of food reaches more consumers, preserved in a way that results in better quality and smaller losses.



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