

The  
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# On food prices, China, Vietnam, the Hoosier state

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## Seeds of discord

SIR – The economic distortion in food prices caused by subsidies for biofuel (“[The silent tsunami](#)”, April 19th) is dwarfed by the distortion caused by subsidies for livestock. In the West we continue to redistribute taxpayers' money to farmers, but in the process have neglected to price in the massive negative environmental externalities of the livestock industry. As well as overgrazing, soil erosion, desertification and deforestation, manure products with gaseous emissions have also had an effect on the environment; a single cow produces hundreds of litres of methane a day.

Feeding the world's poor is not an issue of insufficient global resources, but of inefficient resource allocation. We have diverted crops towards livestock, and now to cars, and away from hundreds of millions of hungry mouths.

Milan Shah

London

SIR – To blame policies that support biofuels for the overall high level of food prices is seriously misguided: how much rice, lettuce, or turnip is used for biofuel? Liberalisation in agriculture will increase the average

price for food, but also its volatility. If you can't "stomach" that, then you need to regulate.

Patrick Chatenay

Canterbury, Kent

SIR – Do my fellow well-off liberals appreciate that by insisting on inefficient and expensive "organic" products with lower crop yields we are driving up the price of food?

Eric Evans

Montclair, New Jersey

SIR – You described Mexico's PROCAMPO programme for farmers as one based on conditional cash transfers (CCT) ("[Reviving the ration card](#)", April 19th). PROCAMPO is not a CCT programme. Mexico does have such a scheme, called *Oportunidades*, which transfers cash to poor families on the condition they take their children to health check-ups and keep them in school. PROCAMPO's main effect is to subsidise people with land. The vast majority of its beneficiaries are sellers of agricultural goods, most of whom are not poor.

Moreover, it is not the right programme for the current crisis in food prices, where an emphasis should be placed on helping the buyers of food. For example, the Mexican government could use *Oportunidades* to transfer more money to its beneficiaries so they can cope with rising food prices.

Nora Lustig

Visiting professor of international affairs

George Washington University

Washington, DC

SIR – Over the past 20 years very little effort has been put into increasing seed yields. Most funding in seed science goes towards genetically modified varieties that are resistant to herbicides. Farmers are sold seeds that "self-destruct" after one use, ensuring a customer

for both seed and chemical year after year.

Furthermore, the distribution of food worldwide has relied on low energy costs to run the ships, lorries and aircraft that transport agricultural produce. The cheap fossil fuels on which that system relies are a thing of the past. What's needed now are farming methods that use less overall energy and produce food closer to home. As you pointed out, there is little arable land available and creating new croplands by continuing to destroy rainforests and fragile ecosystems is a cure worse than the disease.

Warren King

President

WellSpring Management

Oak Park, Illinois

## **China rising**

SIR – I read your leader on a “snarling China” with interest (“[Angry China](#)”, May 3rd). Theodore White, in his 1978 book “In Search of History”, wrote that “to ignore the perception of China by the Chinese is to walk blind into their world.” He also said that “there still lies underneath Chinese manners an extravagant pride in descent and race which nothing can wipe out.” Isn't it possible that the Chinese are enormously proud of their national achievements, and that their reaction to criticism from the West could have been foreseen?

John Davidson

Vermillion, South Dakota

## **Why Vietnam prospers**

SIR – To suggest that Vietnam's recent success is due to its compliance with “the catechism of the ‘Washington Consensus’” is wrongheaded ([Special report on Vietnam](#), April 26th). Vietnam's early achievement in

attaining Millennium Development Goals is the result of a cautious, step-by-step liberalisation, and shows how an effective state can use trade and integration to further its development without slavishly following the Washington rulebook.

The concern now is that Vietnam's increased integration in the world economy may have shrunk the breathing space that it has used so successfully to foster growth and equitable development. As a result, Vietnam may have a harder time riding out the global economic storm.

Steve Price-Thomas

Country director - Vietnam

Oxfam

Hanoi

SIR – If one of America's goals during the Vietnam war was to spread capitalism, then in the final analysis it has prevailed. Instead of feeling a sense of defeat and shame about Vietnam as it did when it evacuated its last personnel from its embassy's roof, America can now feel triumphant.

Khiem Tran

Kyle, South Dakota

SIR – You claimed that a revolt against authoritarian one-party rule in Vietnam is bound to appear eventually once the Vietnamese get used to broad economic and social freedoms (“[Asia's other miracle](#)”, April 26th). Modernisation theory makes a similar claim, that economic growth in an authoritarian state leads to democratisation.

But that theory now recognises that growth can help sustain all types of regimes, democratic and authoritarian. People are willing to accept less political rights if a government can provide them with a sustained comfortable life. Vietnam's impressive economic accomplishments do not necessarily mean it will embrace democracy, though that should not stop its people from pursuing their inalienable rights.

Stig Arild Pettersen

Amman, Jordan

### **What's in a nickname?**

SIR – I noticed your article on Indiana's primary referred to the state's residents as “Hoosiers” (“[More workaday than thou](#)”, May 3rd). I thought your readers might be interested in some theories about how the Hoosier name came about. Some think Hoosier is a remnant of pioneering days, when curious folks would holler “who's here?” There are also references to “Hoosier's men”, labourers from Indiana employed by Samuel Hoosier to work on the Louisville and Portland Canal in Kentucky.

Others maintain the term stems from Indiana's fighting past. Brawling outsiders were quietened by “hushers”. And some say Hoosier derives from many bar-room brawls that ended with the exclamation: “whose ear?” As in the Democratic primaries, there is considerable disagreement on this issue, but we will always and everywhere rally behind this Hoosier identity.

Johannah Bendall

Fort Wayne, Indiana

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