

Feeding the world

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[pumpkins](#) Feeding the world in the future has been in the news recently. The UN Food and Agriculture organisation (FAO) has called for a transformation in global agriculture towards healthy eating and the Lancet medical journal have brought out two reports on eating sustainably. What is interesting is that the Lancet has linked the global health crisis (obesity and linked health disorders) to the climate crisis. The Lancets' recommended diet involves huge cuts in meat production (and therefore consumption) and a huge drop in consumption of sugars. This general idea has been summarised in the past by food writer Micheal Pollen some years ago thus; " **Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.**" The problem with the Lancets recommendations for every person per person per day on the planet is that quantities are either small (29g chicken) or fractional (one fifth of an egg). This makes sense scientifically (per year) but is hard to get your head around in practice. We potentially face huge issues in doing all the above whilst feeding a lot more people whilst not using oil/gas. Which of course is finite. Briefly what are the alternatives. **Food waste.** Around 30% of global production is wasted. In the developing world it tends to be in the field. In the developed world in the fridge. Pros. An obvious solution that would at least buy time. Cons. Easy in theory but hard in practice to bring about. Also the waste could be used for biogas which could be used as an energy source. **Conventional "Western" agriculture.** Pros. Has led to huge increases in food production since WWII. Has saved whole continents from famine. Cons. Relies on farm machinery and fertilizer. Very energy intensive at every stage, fertilizer uses enormous amounts of gas to produce (covered in our [book](#) in more detail). The use of fertilizer has led to severe soil and water courses. It has led to many now talking about peak soil as it literally washes away. Expensive kit. Huge greenhouse gas emissions. **Organic production.** This makes up only very low percentages of food bought in the US and UK. Organic producers have to follow a strict set of rules and the use of pesticides and antibiotics is severely limited. Pros. Good for the planet. Cons. Onerous and controversy rages over productivity and whether there are more nutrients in organic food. Lots of rules and expensive to register with inspections. Still uses oil to a certain extent. **Semi-organic.** This is the approach that my co-author Andy has been taking. Exactly as its name suggests using less of the fertilizer/pesticides but being less strict about it. Pros. Both these and completely organic producers are more likely to use heritage varieties of animals/plants. These have advantages with diseases. Cons. Still only semi-sustainable. Still uses oil to a certain extent. **Permaculture.** Hard to describe but involves using the land in a very specific and targeted way (the best use of land that is sunny/shaded/sheltered organically). Pros. Potentially sustainable. Cons. Quite specialised and more of a way of thinking and culture. Organic but still uses oil to a certain extent. **Biodynamic.** Involves doing things like planting according to the cycles of the moon, organically. Pros. No hard evidence that it works although its proponents reckon it does. Cons. Niche. Organic but still uses oil to a certain extent. **Small farms.** About 80% of the world's food is produced by small farms which make 90% of the 570 million farms worldwide. Pros. The FAO sees these farmers as the key to any transition. Cons. Many smallholders are losing land by people stealing it. Hard to communicate new ideas and many such farmers are resistant to new ideas. Still uses oil to a certain extent. **Technology.** We have covered this on the blog recently. Basically uses robots and drones. Has elements of permaculture to it in that the land is intensively mapped both in terms of topography and soil type, pest monitored using drones/robots. Pros. Not organic but allows lower use of pesticides/fertilizer/water. Cons. Has to be still pretty energy intensive. Job losses for those who work on land. Still uses pesticides/fertilizer. We face huge issues in feeding the world. One area of encouragement to leave you with. There is increasing evidence to suggest global population may peak at a far lower level than had previously been thought. Fertility rates are plunging. In most developed countries they are well below replacement levels (including in the UK). The only continent with very high fertility rates is Africa but even

these are falling. Falls in population bring other economic challenges but in general terms from a sustainability perspective are to be welcomed. On that note... Neil

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