

The Globalisation of Bad Food and Poor Health: Sustainable Development or Sustainable Profits?

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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The proportion of deaths due to cancer around the world increased [from 12 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2013](#). Globally, cancer is already the second-leading cause of death after cardiovascular diseases.

In India, government data indicates that cancer showed a [5 percent increase in prevalence between 2012 and 2014](#) with the number of new cases doubling between 1990 and 2013. The incidence of cancer for some major organs in India is the [highest in the world](#). Reports have also drawn attention to [rising rates](#) of breast cancer in urban areas, and, in 2009, there was a [reported increase](#) in cancer rates in Tamil Nadu's textile belt, possibly due to chemically contaminated water.

The [increase in prevalence of diabetes](#) is also worrying. By 2030, the number of diabetes patients in India is likely to rise to 101 million (World Health Organisation estimate). The number doubled to 63 million in 2013 from 32 million in 2000. Almost 8.2 percent of the adult male population in India has diabetes. The figure is 6.8 percent for women.

In India, almost 76,000 men and 52,000 women in the 30-69 age group died due to diabetes in 2015, according to the WHO. The organisation reports South-East Asia had a diabetic population of around 47 million, which is expected to reach 119 million by 2030.

A [new study](#) in The Lancet has found that India and China continue to have the largest number of underweight people in the world; however, both countries have broken into the top five in terms of obesity.

India leads the world in terms of underweight people. Some 102 million men and 101 million women are underweight, which makes the country home to over 40 percent of the global underweight population.

Contrast this with India's surge in obesity. In 1975, the country had 0.4 million obese men or 1.3 percent of the global obese men's population. In 2014, it was in fifth position globally with 9.8 million obese men or 3.7 percent of the global obese men's population. Among women, India is globally ranked third, with 20 million obese women or 5.3 percent of global population.

Although almost half the nation's under-5s are underweight, the prevalence of underweight children in India is among the [highest in the world](#); at the same time, the country is [fast becoming](#) the diabetes and heart disease capital of the world.

[Many social and economic factors](#), including environmental pollution, poor working and living conditions, tobacco smoking, lack of income and economic distress, lack of access to healthcare and poverty, contribute to ill health and disease. However, conditions like cardiovascular disease and obesity have among other things been linked to sedentary lifestyles and/or certain types of diet, not least modern Western-style convenience food (discussed later).

Western junk food aside, it will be shown that even when we have access to sufficient calorific intake or seemingly nutritious and wholesome traditional diets, there is little doubt that due to the processes involved in growing and processing the food we eat, diet can be a (major) contributory factor in causing certain conditions and illnesses.

The junk food revolution, 'free' trade and poor health



The impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the subsequent flood of cheap US processed food into the country has adversely affected the health of ordinary people. Western 'convenience' (junk) food has displaced more traditional-based diets and is now readily available in every neighbourhood. Increasing rates of diabetes, obesity and other health issues have followed. This [report by GRAIN](#) describes how US agribusiness and retailers have captured the market south of the border and outlines the subsequent impact on the health of Mexican people.

In Europe, due to the 'harmonisation' of food regulatory standards, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) could seriously impact the health of Europeans. Washington wants Europe to eliminate all restrictions on imports of food from the US and to adopt a US-style food supply regulatory regime, stripped of the precautionary principle. US corporations want to make it difficult for European consumers to identify whether what they're eating is food that was produced using health-damaging practices that EU consumers are against, like GMOs, chlorine-washed chicken and meat from animals treated with growth hormone.

These types of trade agreements represent little more than economic plunder by transnational corporations. They use their massive political clout to author the texts of these agreements with the aim of eradicating all restrictions and regulations that would impede greater profits.

Western agribusiness, food processing companies and retail concerns are gaining wider entry into India and through various strategic trade deals are looking to gain a more significant footprint within the country. The Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture and the ongoing India-EU free trade agreement ([like TTIP](#), both are secretive and [largely authored](#) by powerful corporations above the heads of ordinary people) talks have raised serious concerns about the stranglehold that transnational corporations could have on the agriculture and food sectors, including the subsequent impact on the livelihoods of hundreds of millions and not least the health of the public.

Western style fast-food outlets have already been soaring in number throughout the country. Pizza Hut now operates in 46 Indian cities with 181 restaurants and 132 home delivery locations, a 67 percent increase in the last five years). KFC is now in 73 cities with 296 restaurants, a 770 percent increase. McDonalds is in 61 Indian cities with 242 restaurants as compared to 126 restaurants five years back, a 92 percent increase). According to a study published in the Indian Journal of Applied Research, the Indian fast food market is growing at the rate of 30-35 percent per annum (see [this](#)).

Heart disease, liver damage, stroke, obesity and diabetes are just some of the diseases linked to diets revolving around fast-food. Frequent consumption of fast food has been associated with increased body mass index as well as higher intakes of fat, sodium, added sugars and sugar-sweetened beverages and lower intakes of fruits, vegetables, fibre and milk in children, adolescents and adults. Fast food also tends to have higher energy densities and poorer nutritional quality than foods prepared at home and in comparison with dietary recommendations (see [this](#)).

To further appreciate just how unhealthy even seemingly healthy food can be in well-stocked supermarkets, [this report](#) in The Guardian reveals the cocktails of additives, colourants and preservatives that the modern food industry adds to our food.

Moreover, in many regions across the globe industrialised factory farming has replaced traditional livestock agriculture. Animals are thrown together in cramped conditions to scale up production and maximise output at minimum cost. For example, just 40 years ago the Philippines' entire population was fed on native eggs and chickens produced by family farmers. Now, most of those farmers are [out of business](#). And because world trade rules encourage nations from imposing tariffs on subsidised imported products, they are forced to allow cheap, factory-farmed US meat into the country. These products are then sold at lower prices than domestic meat. There is therefore pressure for local producers to scale up and industrialise to compete.

Factory farms increase the risk of pathogens like E coli and salmonella that cause food-borne illness in people. Overuse of antibiotics can fuel the growth of [antibiotic-resistant bacteria](#), the use of [arsenic](#) and [growth hormones](#) can increase the risk of cancer in people and crowded conditions can be a [breeding ground for disease](#). And genetically modified animal feed is also a [serious issue](#), leading to concerns about the impact on both animal and human health.

The green revolution, micronutrient deficient soil and human health

We often hear unsubstantiated claims about the green revolution having saved hundreds of millions of lives, but any short-term gains have been offset. This high-input petro-chemical paradigm helped the drive towards greater monocropping and has resulted in [less diverse diets](#) and [less nutritious](#) foods. Its long-term impact has led to soil degradation and mineral imbalances, which in turn have adversely affected human health (see [this report](#) on India by botanist Stuart Newton – p 9 onward).

Adding weight to this argument, the authors of [this paper](#) from the International Journal of Environmental and Rural Development state:

“Cropping systems promoted by the green revolution have increased the food production but also resulted in reduced food-crop diversity and decreased

availability of micronutrients (Welch, 2002; Stein et al., 2007). Micronutrient malnutrition is causing increased rates of chronic diseases (cancer, heart diseases, stroke, diabetes and osteoporosis) in many developing nations; more than 3 billion people are directly affected by the micronutrient deficiencies (Cakmak et al., 1999; Welch, 2002; WHO, 2002; Welch and Graham, 2004). Unbalanced use of mineral fertilizers and a decrease in the use of organic manure are the main causes of the nutrient deficiency in the regions where the cropping intensity is high (Prasad, 1984; Welch, 1993, 2005)."

The authors imply that the link between micronutrient deficiency in soil and human nutrition is increasingly regarded as important:

"Moreover, agricultural intensification requires an increased nutrient flow towards and greater uptake of nutrients by crops. Until now, micronutrient deficiency has mostly been addressed as a soil and, to a smaller extent, plant problem. Currently, it is being addressed as a human nutrition problem as well. Increasingly, soils and food systems are affected by micronutrients disorders, leading to reduced crop production and malnutrition and diseases in humans and plants (Welch et al., 1982; Welch and Graham, 2004). Conventionally, agriculture is taken as a food-production discipline and was considered a source of human nutrition; hence, in recent years many efforts (Rengel and Graham, 1995a, b; Cakmak et al., 1999; Frossard et al., 2000; Welch and Graham, 2005; Stein et al., 2007) have been made to improve the quality of food for the growing world population, particularly in the developing nations."



Pesticides, the environment, food and health

Hand in hand with the practices outlined above has been the growth of the widespread intensive use of chemical pesticides. There are currently 34,000 pesticides registered for use in the US. Drinking water is [often contaminated by pesticides](#) and more babies are being born with [preventable birth defects](#) due to pesticide exposure. Illnesses are on the rise too, including asthma, autism and learning disabilities, birth defects and reproductive dysfunction, diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases and several types of cancer. The association with [pesticide exposure](#) is becoming stronger with each new study.

In Punjab, pesticide run-offs into water sources have turned the state into a '[cancer epicentre](#)', and [Indian soils are being depleted](#) as a result of the application of green revolution ideology and chemical inputs. India is losing 5,334 million tonnes of soil every year due to soil erosion because of the indiscreet and excessive use of fertilisers, insecticides and pesticides. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research reports that soil is become deficient in nutrients and fertility.

India is one of the world's largest users of pesticides and a profitable market for the corporations that manufacture them. Ladyfinger, cabbage, tomato and cauliflower in particular may contain dangerously high levels because farmers tend to harvest them almost immediately after spraying. Fruit and vegetables are sprayed and tampered with to make them more colourful, and harmful fungicides are sprayed on fruit to ripen them in order to rush them off to market.

Consider that if you live in India, the next time you serve up a good old 'wholesome' meal of rice and various vegetables, you could take in half a milligram of pesticide also. That would be much more than what an average North American person would consume.

Research by the School of Natural Sciences and Engineering (SNSE) at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore has indicated disturbing trends in the increased use of pesticide. In 2008, it reported that many crops for export had been rejected internationally due to high pesticide residues. Moreover, India is one of the largest users of World Health Organization (WHO) class 1A pesticides, including phorate, phosphorus, phosphamidon and fenthion that are extremely hazardous.

Kasargod in Kerala is notorious for the indiscriminate spraying of endosulfan. The government-owned Plantation Corporation of Kerala aerially sprayed the harmful pesticide on cashews for a period of over 20 years. Consequently, it got into rivers, streams and drinking water. Families and their children have been living with physical deformities, cancers and disorders of the central nervous system ever since.

Officials and the pesticide companies benefited from the spraying. At the time, cashew was grown without pesticides throughout Kerala, but the government-run plantation invested millions of rupees of public money in spraying the deadly pesticide. Endosulfen poisoning cases also emerged elsewhere, including Karnataka.

The SNSE notes that pesticide use across India has greatly increased over the years. This not only impacts the health of consumers but also the health of agricultural workers who are subject to pesticide drift and spraying, especially as they tend to wear little or no protection. Research by SNSE shows farmers use a cocktail of pesticides and often use three to four times the recommended amounts (see [this](#)).

Forced-fed development: who benefits?

If there are any beneficiaries in all of this, it is the pesticide manufacturers, the healthcare sector, especially private clinics and drug companies, and the transnational food and agribusiness companies, which now see their main growth markets in Asia, Africa and South America, where traditionally people have tended to eat food from their own farms or markets that sell locally-produced foods.

Of course, the commodification and privatisation of seeds by corporate entities, the manufacturing and selling of more and more chemicals to spray on them, the opening up fast food outlets and the selling of pharmaceuticals or the expansion of private hospitals to address the health impacts of the modern junk food system (in India, the healthcare sector is projected to grow by [16 percent](#) a year) all amounts to the holy grail of neoliberal capitalism, GDP growth; which increasingly means a system defined by jobless growth, greater personal and public debt and massive profits for large corporations and banks.



While there are calls for taxes on unhealthy food and emphasis is placed on encouraging individual 'lifestyle changes' and 'healthy eating', it would be better to call to account the corporations that profit from the growing and production of health-damaging food in the first place and to get agriculture off the [chemical treadmill](#).

Part of the solution entails restoring degraded soils. It also includes moving towards [healthier](#) and [more nutritious](#) organic agriculture, encouraging localised rural and urban food economies that are shielded from the effects of [rigged trade and international markets](#) and shying away from the need for [unhealthy food-processing](#) practices, unnatural preservatives and harmful additives.

In India, it also involves calling a halt to the [programmed dismantling](#) of local rural economies and indigenous agriculture under the guise of 'globalisation' for the [benefit of transnational agribusiness and food retail corporations](#). And it entails placing less emphasis on a headlong rush towards urbanisation (and the subsequent [distortion](#) of agricultural production), while putting greater emphasis on [localisation](#).

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Articles by: [Colin Todhunter](#)

About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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