

## WHO REALLY PAYS FOR CHEAP FOOD? THE SILENT CRISIS LINKING FARMERS & CONSUMERS

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### ABSTRACT



*Many people expect food to be plentiful, reasonably priced, and accessible all year long. Low-cost food benefits customers, but the hidden consequences of this affordability are not acknowledged. A quiet catastrophe that connects farmers' suffering with long-term threats to consumers and the environment has been brought about by the drive to provide inexpensive food. By looking at the difficulties farmers confront, inefficiencies in the agri-food system, environmental externalities, and growing consumer concerns about food quality and safety, this article investigates who really pays the price for inexpensive food. Developing a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable agricultural future requires an understanding of this interwoven system.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Agri-food supply chain, Environmental externalities, Farmer livelihood crisis, Food quality and safety, Low-cost food systems

### INTRODUCTION

Low food prices are frequently regarded as a sign of agricultural development success in contemporary food systems. But behind every reasonably priced meal is a complicated web of farmers, middlemen, customers, and natural resources. In the face of growing input costs, unpredictable weather, and unstable markets, farmers are expected to produce more with less resources. At the same time, people want food that is affordable, secure, and nourishing.

A crucial question is brought up by this contradiction: Who actually pays for inexpensive food? The solution exposes a latent crisis in which consumers face long-term health and food security threats, farmers suffer financial losses, and ecosystems sustain environmental harm. These interrelated issues are closely examined in this article.

### FARMERS' FINANCIAL BURDEN

#### A. GROWING CULTIVATION COSTS

Due to rising expenses for labour, energy, fertiliser, pesticides, and seeds, farmers in both industrialised and developing nations must contend with rising production costs. Farm-gate prices frequently stagnate or fluctuate erratically, despite annual increases in input costs. This disparity lowers profit margins and makes farmers more reliant on loans.

## **B. MARKET INEFFICIENCIES AND INTERMEDIARIES**

Farmers only get a small portion of the final consumer price in many agri-food systems. Farmers' bargaining strength is diminished by the existence of several middlemen, poor storage facilities, and a lack of direct market access. Farmers are therefore forced to sell food at distressed prices, particularly for perishable goods.

## **C. UNCERTAINTY IN INCOME AND DISTRESS FOR FARMERS**

Chronic farmer misery is exacerbated by low profitability and unstable revenue. Market crashes, pest outbreaks, and unpredictable weather all make matters worse. Prolonged economic hardship can have severe societal repercussions, including migration, debt, and a decline in young people's enthusiasm in agriculture.

## **THE ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF LOW-COST FOOD**

### **A. OVERUSE OF NATURAL RESOURCES**

Intense farming methods are frequently used to maintain high yields at low prices. Overuse of irrigation water and chemical fertilisers causes salinisation, nutrient imbalance, soil deterioration, and groundwater depletion. These methods jeopardise ecosystem stability and long-term soil fertility.

### **B. CLIMATE CHANGE AND FARMING**

Climate change affects and is exacerbated by agriculture. Land-use changes, livestock, and synthetic fertilisers all contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. In the meantime, farmers deal with unpredictable rainfall, harsh temperatures, and more frequent droughts and floods, all of which raise production risks and expenses.

### **C. DECREASE IN BIODIVERSITY**

On-farm biodiversity is decreased by monocropping systems that are encouraged for uniformity and market demand. The progressive replacement of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional crop varieties makes food systems more susceptible to diseases, pests, and climate shocks.

## **THE CONSUMER ASPECT OF LOW-COST FOOD**

### **A. THE DELUSION OF AFFORDABILITY**

The full cost of food remains concealed, despite customers enjoying low retail pricing. Government subsidies, public health spending, and environmental deterioration all indirectly transfer the burden to society. Therefore, inexpensive food at the market does not always translate into low national costs.

### **B. CONCERNS ABOUT FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY**

Agrochemical abuse or overuse may be encouraged by pressure to lower production costs. Concerns regarding food safety and long-term health effects are raised by pesticide and contaminant residues in food. Transparency, traceability, and food produced responsibly are becoming more and more important to consumers.

### **C. DIETARY TRANSITIONS AND NUTRITION**

Nutritious foods are frequently more difficult to obtain than inexpensive, high-calorie foods. This leads to lifestyle-related illnesses and vitamin deficiencies, among other forms of malnutrition. A significant public health concern is the gap between nutrition and affordability.

## **CHALLENGES IN POLICY, SUBSIDIES, AND STRUCTURE**

### **A. SUBSIDIES BASED ON INPUTS**

To help farmers and maintain low food costs, governments frequently provide subsidies for irrigation, energy, and fertilisers. Although these subsidies offer temporary respite, they could promote wasteful resource usage and put a burden on public coffers.

### **B. SUPPORT FOR PRICES AND GAPS IN PURCHASES**

Only a small number of crops and regions benefit from minimum support prices and procurement procedures. Market instability still affects a lot of farmers who cultivate pulses, fruits, and vegetables. Income disparity in the farming community is sustained by the absence of inclusive price support measures.

### **C. SYSTEMIC REFORMS ARE NECESSARY**

It is crucial to implement structural changes that prioritise supply chain efficiency, value addition, farmer-producer organisations, and market access. The full cost of sustainable manufacturing must be reflected in fair pricing arrangements.

## **ROUTES FOR A JUST FOOD SYSTEM**

### **A. INCREASING FARMER-CONSUMER CONNECTIONS**

While providing consumers with fresh produce, direct marketing strategies, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and internet platforms can lower middlemen and enhance price realisation for farmers.

### **B. ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABLE FARMING**

It is possible to lower environmental costs without sacrificing output by using sustainable techniques including integrated fertiliser management, water-efficient irrigation, with diverse cropping systems.

### **C. CONSUMER CONSCIOUSNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Consumers with knowledge are essential to changing food systems. Farmers' livelihoods and environmental preservation can be supported by a willingness to pay reasonable prices for food produced sustainably.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a significant hidden cost associated with cheap meals. Consumers confront long-term health and food security issues, ecosystems suffer from resource misuse and pollution, and farmers carry the financial burden due to low wages and high risks. The need to reconsider how food is priced, produced, and consumed is highlighted by the quiet crisis that exists between farmers and consumers.

Farmers must be acknowledged as important players rather than cost absorbers in a just and sustainable food system. True affordability should take into consideration nutritional security, environmental sustainability, and economic viability. The real cost of food can only be fairly balanced by shared responsibility among farmers, consumers, markets, and legislators.

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