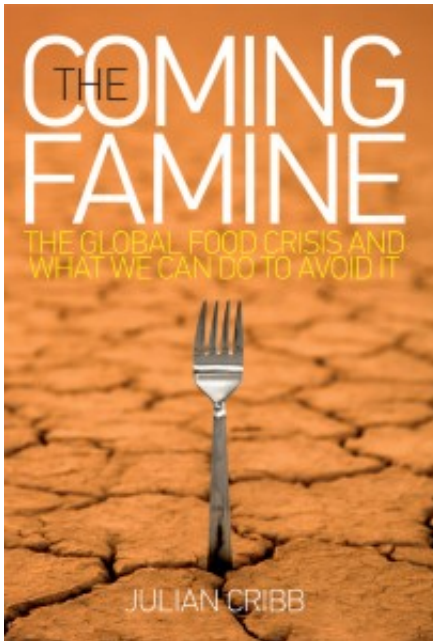


## Cookbooks as military weapons: a review of 'The Coming Famine'

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*The Coming Famine: The Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do to Avoid It*

By Julian Cribb

[CSIRO Publishing](#) | \$29.95

With food prices at record levels and an escalating famine in the Horn of Africa, food security is a defining issue of today's development agenda. Sufficient resources are available to feed the world's population, but we lack the capability to coordinate them effectively. Great strides have been made in the past towards achieving global food security – the “Green Revolution” of the mid twentieth century saw crop yields in developing countries multiply several-fold – yet around a sixth of the world's population has less food than they need. And if we struggle to feed the world today, despite the technological progress and global economic growth of the last century or so, the outlook is becoming bleaker as more and more obstacles emerge.

It is these obstacles and the disastrous nature of our current trajectory that are the focus of *The Coming Famine*. Science journalist Julian Cribb sets the scene early in the book when he outlines the various ways in which food insecurity can and will cause conflict – or how, in the twenty-first century, “we either eat ? or we fight.” He then explores the major causes of current and future food insecurity on both the supply and demand sides of the equation: water shortages; the declining level of arable land per capita; loss of nutrients from soil, and limits to fertiliser production; over-fishing and ocean acidification; under-investment in agricultural research and development; high energy intensity of global food production, as well as over-reliance on fossil fuels; climate change; population growth and changing dietary habits (towards meat-based products) as incomes rise; and, finally, the inequities imposed on farmers in developing countries by the international trade regime.

Three factors deserve particular attention. The first is water. In many developing countries, agricultural use constitutes around three-quarters of total water demand. Hence, degradation of water sources from over-use

or pollution undermines agricultural productivity. What's more, illness caused by unsafe water diminishes labour productivity and incomes, another way in which water insecurity affects the ability of poor households to get access to food. The second factor, fisheries, is often overlooked in discussions about food security. Much of the world's population, particularly in Asia, relies on fish as a main source of protein. Decades of poor management and rising human populations have dramatically reduced stock levels and, in some places, destroyed entire fisheries, and that damage is now being amplified by rising acidity in the oceans due to anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions. Third, Cribb raises the issue of under-investment in agricultural research and development. Over the past three decades, the supply of public funding and, consequently, the volume of research activity has not kept pace with the global need for improved crop varieties and better farming techniques. Given the food requirements of a growing global population and the proximate need to adapt farming to a changed climate, an upsurge in agricultural research and development is urgently needed.

At the end of *The Coming Famine* Cribb proposes five principal measures to prevent the global food disaster he envisages. The first is to rebalance diets away from meat in high-income countries, and in emerging economies as incomes rise. Second, we need to curb the enormous waste of food that occurs globally, both in households and en route to market. Third, Cribb recommends a four- to five-fold increase in agricultural research and development, including extra funding to deploy this knowledge. He suggests a targeted rise of between US\$36 billion to US\$145 billion annually, most of which should come out of defence budgets. Fourth, we need to address climate change, including through land-based carbon sequestration. Finally, Cribb floats the idea of a "world farm," where governments, business and consumers cooperate harmoniously to ensure global resources are sustainably managed.

Although this last measure is seriously over-optimistic and the others aren't accompanied by a detailed discussion of their implementation, Cribb's recommendations are, by and large, reasonable. Each chapter also includes practical recommendations for individuals. These are mostly sensible and general common sense ("waste less food and compost organic material"), although sometimes slightly curious ("teach our children to prize water as much as freedom"), and, besides, you'd think that broader policy actions would have a larger impact.

Cribb is neither a scientist nor an economist; he is a science journalist whose target audience is, in his words, "the ordinary citizen of Planet Earth." Rather than being a scholarly work, the book is written in a journalistic style with a succession of statistics and quotes used to establish ideas. This barrage of numbers and excerpts from other works is not easy reading, but their cumulative shock value is likely to create a sense of astonishment in a reader unfamiliar with the topic, though fatigue could set in at some point in the book's 260-odd pages.

That is not to say that Cribb simply collates other sources without engaging in any analysis. The chapter on research and development, for example, includes a balanced discussion of genetically modified crops. Too often this topic attracts simplified, dogmatic proclamations from both sides of the debate, when the truth probably lies somewhere in between. Cribb is more in favour than against, because "the world will need all the tools at its disposal to raise crop yields," but he also acknowledges potential problems with the deployment of genetically modified crops. Similarly, his discussion of biofuels is impartial and informative, outlining the many downsides, such as competition with food crops for land and water, and acknowledging the areas of potential benefit, such as algae farming.

Unfortunately, however, these analyses are offset by distorted, and at times bizarre, commentary found elsewhere in the book. For example, Cribb's discussion of population growth includes a wholesale condemnation of birth subsidies. He derides the notion that "we need more citizens to support the ageing ones" and bemoans the fact that "many governments still attempt to bribe their citizens to have more babies." Japan is singled out for particular criticism for resisting the simultaneous ageing and decline of its population. Demographic change and the dependency ratio of workers to non-workers is a major economic issue concerning not just Japan, but most Western countries and, in a few decades, China as well. Cribb could have examined the potential contribution of international migration to rebalancing demographic disparities between developed and developing countries, for example, or discussed how welfare reform

could reduce the burden on the public purse of a skewed dependency ratio. Instead, he simply dismisses “the crude expedient of [governments] merely trying to multiply their people.”

Cribb’s discussion of the growing demand for food, or the “global feeding frenzy,” is also strange. He asserts that “most people now feel entitled to high levels of protein and fat consumption and, if they cannot obtain them in their birthplace, are willing to move across nations and continents.” I would think that forced migration within and away from developing countries has more to do with, say, violence, water scarcity or not having enough food of any sort, rather than proximity to a fast food outlet. Not so, according to Cribb, who specifically includes refugees in his description of the “ravenous consumer,” the “affluent twenty-first century nomads... spreading the toxic message that unrestrained, promiscuous consumption is OK.”

Such hyperbolic descriptions are symptomatic of the principal weakness of *The Coming Famine*: too much of the text is dedicated to generating a sense of moral outrage in the reader. Cribb consistently seeks to shock with emotive language and grand generalisations. These devices are not present on every page, but they occur so frequently that they appear contrived, and wading through them becomes exhausting for even the interested or persevering reader. More serious is the reaction of the sceptical or less dedicated readers. Is it likely that they will be more willing to accept the veracity of Cribb’s collection of facts, statistics and quotes if they are accompanied by activist language and calls to arms? I doubt it.

Perhaps the most glaring example of unnecessary sensationalism is the preface of the final chapter. Cribb tells a story of a school trip in 2085 to view a museum exhibit that “sends a chill of horror through the awed children. As they draw closer they begin to feel its power... this fount of all the ruin, the suffering, the hunger, the loss. It’s a cookbook.” Cookbooks are then compared to “the most dangerous of military weapons,” their text likened to “Nero’s lyrics to a burning Rome.” The seriousness of food security doesn’t require such literary embellishment.

Somewhere in the communication of serious and urgent global issues there has to be a balance between sensationalism and moderation. For the most part, communication of climate change science has occurred at the other end of the spectrum. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and climate scientists more broadly, have been criticised for over-moderating their message for fear of being alarmist. Great emphasis is placed by climate scientists on acknowledging uncertainty and average or median projections, when in fact there is great certainty of serious consequences and high probability, on the current trajectory, of worst-case scenarios. It is arguable that the measured presentation of climate science has contributed to public apathy in countries like Australia and the United States, although it appears that the science community is now beginning to strengthen its message. But how far should communication of such important issues go towards the activist end of the spectrum? Are disengaged sections of society likely to respond favourably and actively to the type of approach adopted by Cribb?

*The Coming Famine* is written by a professional in science communication and it may be that my opinions can be attributed to a lack of expertise in that area. It may be that Cribb’s style of presentation appeals to readers who are less familiar with the issues, or who are discovering them for the first time. Perhaps this book is successful in raising awareness, or perhaps it is not reaching as wide an audience as it could have done. Successful or not, the book does raise the important subject of how science, economics, and academic research more generally, is communicated. Cribb’s approach tends to the more sensational. I believe that this is not the best approach. It treats its audience with an element of disrespect, assuming that their attention requires perpetual astonishment. Just as some environmental advocacy groups undercut the accessibility of their message by overt partisanship, a large portion of the language used in *The Coming Famine* sets the book up to be dismissed as an overstatement of the issues. Yet it shouldn’t be dismissed, because the facts are plain from the research that Cribb synthesises. The author’s choice of sources is predominantly sound, and the issues he gives prominence to are, by and large, the significant ones. It is just a great shame that he overplays his hand in their presentation, and thereby undermines his credibility.

The stated aim of *The Coming Famine* is to be a “wake-up call” for humanity. But it is one thing to get people’s attention, and another, much more important objective, to retain it.

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