



LETTERS

edited by Jennifer Sills

Food Price Complexities Require Nuance

I WAS DISAPPOINTED BY J. SWINNEN AND P. SQUICCIARINI'S POLICY FORUM, "MIXED MESSAGES ON prices and food security" (27 January, p. 405). Ironically, in making their case that the nuanced challenges of food prices are "too often absent in public debate," the authors paint a misleading picture of Oxfam's positions, lacking exactly the type of nuance they claim to promote.

To represent Oxfam's views, the authors cite an obscure press release, the primary purpose of which was to announce celebrity photos. In choosing this source, they excluded dozens of communications and policy papers on trade and agriculture policy that provide more extensive analysis, some of which directly undermine the authors' core case. For example, an Oxfam report on the 2008 food price crisis goes to great lengths to describe a "false dilemma," arguing that food prices, whether high or low, are like a double-edged sword bound to hurt either consumers or producers (1).

Swinnen and Squicciarini also imply that maintaining consistent policy positions is bullheaded. They fail to consider that Oxfam has a coherent understanding of the impact of food prices on poor people. We have highlighted both the dangers of drastic price spikes (2) and the hazards of unfair trade policies for poor farmers (3). If the messages seem "mixed" at first glance, it is because the problems are complex and not well suited to headline-length explanation.

Providing massive subsidies for agriculture in rich countries is unfair and an extremely inefficient way to reduce food prices for poor people (1); likewise, spiraling food prices can harm vulnerable people, so measures to moderate the price volatility and mediate the impacts on poor families are needed. If one's concern is for the well-being and livelihoods of poor people, as ours is, then these are consistent positions.

Ultimately, the authors' argument rests on the idea that press releases are not nuanced enough and advocacy messages oversimplify problems. This may be a compelling revelation for some academics. But in the real world, where Oxfam works to respond to emergencies, fight special interests, and empower the most vulnerable, we recognize that some measure of simplicity and accessibility in our messaging is required to achieve change.

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Response

KRIPKE TAKES ISSUE WITH THE REFERENCES we cited in our Policy Forum. We based our arguments on a thorough analysis of many reports and communications of all the institutions we discussed, including Oxfam's (1). For example, a substantive 2008 Oxfam report (2) (written after prices increased) concludes that "only in a few countries are small producers benefiting from higher prices," and emphasizes that farmers are often net consumers who face many constraints, implying that they would benefit from lower prices. Yet a 2005 Oxfam report (3) (written before prices started to rise) does not mention that small farmers and rural households are net consumers of food. These inconsistencies demonstrate our points. Kripke argues that the issue of food security is too complex to fit into a headline, but we found simplistic explanations in lengthy reports as well.

We agree with Kripke that massive subsidies for agriculture in rich countries are an inefficient way to reduce food prices for poor people. However, tariffs on food imports are inefficient as well (4, 5), as a policy instrument to address farmers' weaknesses and certainly as a mechanism to reduce food prices for poor people. Yet Oxfam has defended these policies, both before (6) and after (2) the food price crisis.

Finally, our concerns did not emerge from "academic" considerations. We are intensely involved in policy discussions on food policy and poverty (7–9), and we have seen firsthand that the absence of nuance in communications and reports has real-world implications on public debate and decision-making. For instance, there is currently extensive lobbying about the future of European agricultural policy—at stake are about US\$500 billion of farm subsidies over the next 7 years. Pressure groups are referring



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to simplistic statements about the effects of high food prices on poverty and food security to argue that these subsidies are helping to address global food security (10, 11). Those who do not realize that simplistic messages may lead to undesirable policy outcomes are the ones who seem to live in an ivory tower.

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policy post-2013" (Copa-Cogeca, Brussels, 2010); [www.copa-cogeca.be/fimg/userfile/7142\\_PAC\\_E.pdf](http://www.copa-cogeca.be/fimg/userfile/7142_PAC_E.pdf).

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## A Step Backward for Italy's Meritocracy

ITALIAN SCIENTISTS HAVE LONG LAMENTED THE lack of resources, political attention, and meritocracy in assigning taxpayers' money. In 2007, things began to change. The 2007 and 2008 national budget laws allocated €81 million (US\$107 million) to projects submitted by researchers under 40 years old. They were judged by an international committee of scientists under age 40 that was appointed according to impact factor and citation index scores. Even though this fund accounted for only 10% of the entire public research money, it was a crucial turning point toward meritocracy. Finally, the international rules of peer review were entering the Italian system, acknowledging meritocracy and setting researchers free from the virtual servitude under which they had been kept by old academicians.

Recently, inexplicably, Italy has fallen back to the old way of allocating taxpayers' research money and has done so in spite of government promises of open competition and meritocracy. The so-called "Simplification Decree" includes anti-crisis measures suggested by several departments, including the one led by the Minister of Education, University, and Research: Francesco Profumo. He has canceled the articles of the laws that brought peer review to Italy, explaining that the method introduced in 2007 was too cumbersome to apply. Minister Profumo now promises a new, simpler law, but for the time being, young researchers applying for grants in Italy will have to rely on the old questionable, nontransparent evaluation method that rewards clients of godfathers, rather than merit.

It is not only money for valuable researchers that will be lacking from now on, but hope for their future and for that of the

country. The only way out is to adopt strict peer-review rules for the allocation of all research funds, at all times.

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### CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

**Letters:** "Finding a good research question, in theory" by N. Bodemer and A. Ruggeri (23 March, p. 1439). The volume in Reference 1 should be 52, not 57. The correct reference is: A. W. Kimball, *J. Am. Stat. Assoc.* **52**, 133 (1957).

**News & Analysis:** "New institute aims to help academics make medicines" by R. F. Service (16 March, p. 1288). Merck should have been referred to as Merck & Co. based in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey.

**Reports:** "Sexual deprivation increases ethanol intake in *Drosophila*" by G. Shohat-Ophir *et al.* (16 March, p. 1351). In the abstract of the print version, the sentence "Activation or inhibition of the NPF system in turn enhanced or reduced ethanol preference" should read: "Activation or inhibition of the NPF system in turn reduced or enhanced ethanol preference." The error has been corrected in the HTML and PDF versions online.

**Editorial:** "Worldwide lessons from 11 March" by K. Omi (9 March, p. 1147). The Editorial referred to "statement issued in October 2010 by the Science and Technology in Society forum." The statement was issued in 2011. The date has been corrected in the HTML and PDF versions online.

### TECHNICAL COMMENT ABSTRACTS

#### Comment on "Global Resilience of Tropical Forest and Savanna to Critical Transitions"

Zak Ratajczak and Jesse B. Nippert

Hirota *et al.* (Reports, 14 October 2011, p. 232) used spatial data to show that grasslands, savannas, and forests represent opposing stable states. Reanalyzing their data and drawing from temporal studies, we argue that spatial analyses underestimate the bistability of grasslands and savannas due to limitations of substituting space for time. We propose that temporal and spatial data are needed to predict critical transitions between grasslands and savannas.

Full text at [www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/336/6081/541-c](http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/336/6081/541-c)

#### Response to Comment on "Global Resilience of Tropical Forest and Savanna to Critical Transitions"

Egbert H. Van Nes, Milena Holmgren, Marina Hirota, Marten Scheffer

Ratajczak and Nippert note that transient states between treeless and savanna states are more common than between savanna and forest, and suggest that this can be explained by a slower rate of change in the intermediate conditions at drier sites. We show that probability distributions of tree cover rather reflect the interplay between intrinsic rates of change and perturbation regimes.

Full text at [www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/336/6081/541-d](http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/336/6081/541-d)

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