Science may be the key to world food security

SPEAKING at the Oxford Farming Conference last week, the Defra Secretary Owen Paterson was bullish about the prospects for British food production. With the world's population already standing at seven billion and another 2.7 billion expected by 2050, and a growing global middle class who prefer hamburgers to rice, 'phenomenal opportunities' have opened up. Politically, the difficulty of addressing this was shown by the EU Commissioner for Agriculture Dacian Cioloş.

Mr Cioloş comes from Romania, a country whose own farms range from former collectives, which now attract foreign investment, to bucolic village smallholdings, richer in wildflowers than money. Although it must be difficult enough to formulate a single policy for Romania, Mr Cioloş has the responsibility of implementing one for the whole of the EU: 28 countries, as different as Cyprus and Finland, Greece and the UK.

The latest reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), agreed last year, can be seen, perhaps, as an implicit admission of the impossibility of the task. Member states now have greater freedom in how they apply the Single Farm Payment and Rural Development Policy. That's sensible, but makes the CAP rather less common to all.

As the outgoing president of the NFU, Peter Kendall, emphasised, the CAP had, as its original object in the Treaty of Rome 55 years ago 'to increase agricultural productivity by promoting technical progress... to ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community'. Improved farming would automatically lift the rural economy.

The CAP was never meant to be a social policy.

Europe must keep its eye on agricultural efficiency. The danger is that its rich consumers prefer it to become a museum of rural life. At a time when more than 12% of the world's arable land—an area seven times the size of the UK—uses genetically modified (GM) seeds, the EU persists in regarding GM as a risky new technology, to which the precautionary principle should be applied to the ultimate. This month, the EU is expected to license a type of GM maize—but it will be the first such licence issued for 15 years.

Not that all the solutions to the global food crisis will be high-tech. In Africa, the charity Farm Africa has found that striking improvements can be made to the lives of rural families by simple means.

It cites one Tanzanian smallholder who, when given elementary farming and business training, could increase her sesame crop from four bags to 20 bags each season; the price of each bag sold has quadrupled. Instead of struggling to survive each winter—or failing to survive a bad harvest—farmers like her can now afford to send their children to school.

Huge benefits can result from modest interventions. This gives hope that mankind may, by one means or another, succeed in feeding itself in coming decades, as long as each part of the world does what it can to grow more. Europeans have the luck to live in affluence. They have a responsibility to embrace science.