The food and energy crisis: A taste of things to come

Last year saw the climax of the world’s most recent energy shock. The oil price climbed with alarming speed to a peak just shy of US$150, nearly triple its January 2007 low of US$55. This rapid increase in energy cost revealed two things: the limitations in global oil production capacity; and perhaps more alarmingly, the amount of fossil fuel energy in the human food chain. The higher energy costs resulted in significant increases in the cost of food across the board.

When supply cannot meet demand, prices rise, and those that can least afford to pay are priced out of the market. When the commodity in question is food, it is the poor that go hungry. The increasing food prices caused considerable alarm amongst governments and development agencies. In July 2008 the International Monetary Fund issued a warning that the increasing oil and food costs posed a threat to food security in many poor and developing countries.

The crisis was brought on by the increasing competition for limited oil resources, which has intensified as the standard of living has risen in many parts of the developing world, and as developing economies continue to industrialise. In particular, the rapid growth of the titanic Chinese and Indian economies has contributed to a spike in global energy demand.

The energy crisis put food security firmly back on the agenda. The point is that we need to keep it there. The present global economic downturn has granted the world a temporary reprieve, but once economies begin to recover, prices will once again soar. We should learn from this brief vision of the future and take steps to avoid a repeat episode.

For many years the aquaculture industry has been moving towards increasing culture of ‘high value’ and typically carnivorous aquaculture species, i.e. high priced luxuries for wealthy consumers. Low cost species by contrast haven’t got nearly as much attention in the press, although they are considerably more important from a food security point of view in that they are more affordable, are less energy and resource intensive (being predominantly herbivorous or otherwise low in the food chain) and comprise the clear majority of global aquaculture production.

It’s fair to say that low-cost species haven’t received the attention they deserved, and perhaps they should. With this in mind, NACA and FAO will convene a workshop on ‘Market chains and issues associated with biosecurity of low-valued cultured commodities in Asia’, in Siem Reap, Cambodia, 23-26 February 2009. Further details about the workshop, as well as the report and issues raised, will be made available on the Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture section of the NACA website in due course.