

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat" (Matthew 25:35)

Notes

"In sub-Saharan Africa women constitute between 60 and 80 percent of the labour for food production, both for household consumption and for sale. Moreover, agriculture is becoming a predominantly female sector as a consequence of male out-migration. Women now constitute the majority of small farmers, providing most of the labour and managing a large part of the farming activities on a daily basis" (2002, The State of Food and Agriculture, FAO, Rome, p. 57).

The Global Food System and Hunger

In 2002, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that 815 million people were undernourished; with 61 percent living in Asia, 24 percent in Africa. At their most recent meeting, in 2008, the FAO predicted that 1 billion people will face "dire food insecurity" over the next decade. This is the case despite significant improvements in agriculture made in many regions of the world. In terms of sheer quantity, there's never been so much food; yet there's never been as many malnourished, hungry, and starving people.

Since the 1992 Earth Summit, it has been clear that the environmental crisis has a human face, and solutions to the environmental crisis cannot be separated from the elimination of poverty. We know that new technologies can be a critical part of the answer, but they are not enough. Our attitudes and beliefs about life and survival, our aspirations, hopes, and ideas about "progress" and "the good" are involved. These attitudes and beliefs have a profound impact on every part of life, including the most basic elements -- soil, water, air, and energy -- that enter into agricultural practices and the production of food.

We have two courses of action: the first is to invest further in the globalized, corporate strategy for producing food at the expense of

Notes

For Advocacy and
Education on Food and
Agriculture

- Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development
 - Target 12: Develop further an open, honest, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system.
 - Target 13: Address the special needs of the Least Developed Countries
 - Target 18: In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies.

Current Facts about the Crisis in Food and Agriculture

Although land degradation is difficult to measure, due to differing definitions of what constitutes a "forest" and a "desert," the rate and scale of both deforestation and desertification is staggering. The best estimate for the loss of forests worldwide in the 1990's represents a parcel of land the size of Venezuela and similar trends are noted for the formation of deserts. This has an obviously direct and destructive impact on our ability to produce food for a hungry world (Global Forest Assessment, 2002, FAO, Rome).

The relation between agricultural production for food, on the one hand, and energy, on the other, complicates our understanding of food issues. Currently, Brazil is the world's leading producer of sugar-cane based bioethanol, followed by the United States, which is the world's largest producer of corn for agofuels. Ethanol production in China, Thailand, and India could rise dramatically in the next few years. Nigeria is considering the use of cassava for bioethanol production, while Pakistan is already launching programs in molasses-based energy production for the same purpose (Biofuels into the European Union: An Agricultural Perspective, European Communities, 2008).

Organic agriculture is based on the effective management of local ecosystems involved in food production. Organic methods protect the environment and produce healthier food for several reasons: they reduce noxious chemicals that contribute to greenhouse gases;

they store carbon in soil and build organic matter; and they minimize overall energy consumption by up to 70% (The International Organization of Organic Agricultural Movements, Bonn, 2007).

The history of humankind suggests that people have traditionally used on the order of 10,000 plant species for food. Today, only 20 major crops (primarily wheat, rice and maize) provide 90 percent of the world's dietary intake (Feeding the World: Sustainable Management of Natural Resources, Background Paper No. 8, Commission on Sustainable Development, 2008, p. 7).

Despite global commitments to poverty reduction, the annual average allocations of Official Development Assistance for agriculture in least-developed countries fell by 57 percent between 1983 and 2000 (Feeding the World: Sustainable Management of Natural Resources, Background Paper No. 8, Commission on Sustainable Development, 2008, p. 15).

In North Africa and the Near East, 60-70 percent of all surface and groundwater is used for agriculture. Water demand is steadily increasing, while water supply is steadily decreasing (The State of Food and Agriculture, FAO, Rome, p. 133).

Some 20 percent of the world's drylands are affected by human soil degradation, which puts at risk the livelihoods of more than 1 billion people (Global Environment Outlook, 2008, The United Nations Environment Program).

The Intergovernmental Panel and Climate Change estimates that 80 percent of global carbon stocks are stored in soils and forests and that carbon contained in them has been released as a result of agriculture and deforestation. Emissions from agricultural activities alone account for 12-40 percent of current human-caused emissions (International Yearbook of Environmental and Resource Economics, Edward Elgar Publishing, USA, 2001).

What the Churches Can Do

- Support local farmer's and local/regional farmer's markets.
- Bring local farmers, especially women, to discussions with your congregations where they can describe their experience and express their concerns.
- Voice your concerns to policy-makers and government leaders about following the precautionary principle ("first, do no harm") in the use of genetically engineered seeds and pesticides.
- Encourage consumers to choose locally-grown organic products.
- From the pulpit, clarify the linkages between poverty, hunger, human rights and the environment.

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local communities; the second is to complement the corporate strategy by giving more attention to community-based agriculture and the support of local farmers. In most areas of the world, small and medium-sized farmers need financial assistance and help with depleted soils, water management, and the replacement of harmful pesticides with organic methods. The second approach, which helps to build sustainable communities, has the distinct advantage of not only preserving biodiversity and the health of watersheds, forests, and soils, but also drawing upon local knowledge of biodiversity and agricultural practices, and decreasing reliance on uncertain overseas markets.

The vital significance of local, community-based agriculture has been underscored by the controversial growth in agrofuels -- the use of agricultural products to help solve the problem of rising petroleum costs and greenhouse gas emissions. An FAO report issued in 2008 estimates that land set aside for the large scale production of agrofuels in developing countries is likely to grow from 1% of land, its current level, to 5% by 2050. This suggests that unless policies are adopted in poverty-stricken areas to actively support the livelihoods of small farmers, especially women, then vulnerability to hunger and malnutrition will markedly increase in the years ahead.

Food, Agriculture and the Millennium Development Goals

- Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger
 - Target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
- Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability
 - Target 9: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs to reverse the loss of environmental resources.

