



Agriculture after September 11

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The outrage and outpouring of sympathy after the September 11 attacks underscore the deep sense of unease that many people feel about the world in which they live. It seems that literally everything is out of control: from terrorism to tornadoes, from climate change to AIDS to BSE. In the poorest countries, people are engulfed by profound change: in Asia, forests are lost to highways and cities, and rice paddies are converted to factories to produce microchips. African livestock die from disease in massive numbers. In rural Latin America, tractors are rapidly replacing manual labour, pushing rural women and men into the masses of urban unemployed.

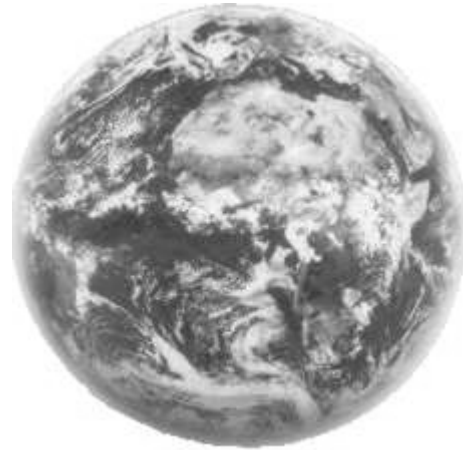
■ Agriculture in a globalized world

In a world shaken by terrorism and war, does it make sense to talk about agriculture, poverty and hunger? It does, for three reasons:

- ▶ hunger and poverty increase the risk of social unrest, and most of the hungry live in rural areas or have recently migrated to cities
- ▶ the current sense of unease about rapid modernization is especially prominent in the area of food and agriculture.
- ▶ the need and - more importantly - the *potential* to act collectively and responsibly exist in agriculture.

Agriculture is, in many ways, a victim of its own success. Scientific advances have revolutionized farming and led to huge increases in productivity. The world as a whole has become richer and better fed. International trade has boomed and food prices have remained low. Everywhere, farmers are producing for the world market. Diets in most parts of the world have diversified.

But progress has been uneven. Some 800 million people remain chronically hungry, most of them in rural areas where agricultural development is limited by low rainfall, poor soils, insufficient infrastructure and inadequate institutions. These are truly the world's vulnerable areas, where those seeking to foment social unrest and rejection of modernity may find fertile ground.



Agricultural progress has often been uneven because we have addressed short-term production problems more than long term ecological and economic sustainability. Agriculture is blamed by consumers for producing unsafe and tasteless food, infected with BSE or salmonella, and by environmentalists for poisoning surface waters, draining lakes and destroying forests. Globalization has had major direct and indirect effects: concentration of ownership in the seed and agrochemical industries, the genetic uniformization of production, and the disappearance of local varieties and local foods.

The sad paradox is that the reduced importance of agriculture as a percentage of GNP has created the false illusion that the sector is irrelevant, if not outright destructive, and that a return to traditional ways would be an improvement over the present. This anti-modern view culminates in blind rejection of biotechnology and totally obscures the potential of technology to adapt to new ecological and social challenges.

■ Agriculture in a new era

Yet, the time may be ripe for a renewal of political will to mobilize the agricultural sector for a more stable and just world. Eight years of negotiations on a treaty on sharing the benefits of plant genetic resources were successfully concluded in November 2001. Agreements have

also been reached on reducing the risks of trade and application of hazardous agro-chemicals, on monitoring animal diseases, and on the importance of food safety. FAO is exploring a code of good agricultural practices that may alleviate fears and increase consumer confidence.

A sense of interconnectedness is growing. But needed also is a greater sense of global ownership of the problems of agriculture and food production, and a recognition of joint responsibility in eradicating hunger and poverty. Perhaps development assistance will increase if it fits as a tool to facilitate a worldwide political coalition.

So what is the way forward, for agriculture and food security? What can be done concretely to use agriculture to address some of the fundamental issues of today's world? First, we must recognize that agriculture is part of the solution and not just a problem. Agricultural development is a key to social stability and equity in many parts of the world. It can help to alleviate the subtle and unspoken fears of modernization and the pace of change if innovation is handled transparently and justly. Agriculture also plays a role in mitigating the effects of climate change. There is no shortage of scientific tools to make sustainable intensification a reality, if they are applied responsibly.

At the same time, agriculture in the 21st century must be prepared to face new challenges, many of them related to globalization and modernization. Among them:

- ▶ *More supranational regulations* - the WTO, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Kyoto protocol on climate change, regulations on intellectual property rights, regional organisations such as the European Union and NAFTA. Many of these regulations have not been initiated in the agricultural sector and agriculture will have to adapt.
- ▶ *Civil society will be crucial* in reshaping the agricultural sector. A careful balance will have to be sought between science-driven innovation and consumer concerns, including ethics. Food safety will become the measure of agriculture's credibility.
- ▶ *Society will place increasing demands on agriculture*, not least in the protection of the environmental values such as biodiversity and other added values at farm or society level. Agriculture will be about more than just producing calories or dry matter per hectare. Protecting incomes and rural livelihoods will be equally important in the South and the North.

▶ *Technology will be designed for precision agriculture*, taking into account the conditions of specific production systems. While the scientific frontier now appears to lie in the realm of biotechnology, only research into site-specific management of land and water will allow farmers to bridge the yield gap.

▶ *The animal sector will grow considerably*. Zoonotic and other animal diseases, many of them with immediate transboundary effects, are growing concerns with major trade implications.

▶ *Greater concentration* in the international industrial inputs and processing sectors seems inevitable, yet the dynamics of the medium scale and local industries may be crucial to a healthy commercial development.

▶ *Rather than looking at agriculture in isolation*, future research, development and policy will need to take account of the entire chain from the physical environment and production to consumption and health.

The ultimate challenge lies in two organizing principles. First, *to guarantee and facilitate access* of poor countries and poor people to markets, to technology and to knowledge. Second, *to maintain and enhance diversity and options* - diversity of products and production technology allows consumers and producers to make informed choices rather than having a blueprint pushed down their throats. Openness about production processes and their scientific underpinnings is essential.

■ **FAO in this new era**

In the realm of food and agriculture FAO acts as an objective broker that brings together decision-makers from different backgrounds and creeds to discuss technical options for an ecologically and socially balanced development. FAO provides advice to governments and civil society on managing change in rural areas and strengthening consumer confidence. Let us not forget that hatred and distrust grow in situations where there is no dialogue and no freedom to choose. FAO helps to develop a sense of ownership and public responsibility for the agricultural sector.

There can be no lasting stability and justice without a solution to the problem of hunger and, hence, without agriculture. But it must be an agriculture governed by principles of sound ecology, equitable economics and respect for producer and consumer concerns. In a globalized world, local solutions must be embedded in a global context. We must mobilize the will, the resources and the knowledge to do this - today more than ever.