PERSPECTIVE

The Importance of Agriculture

PERSPECTIVE -- Civilization began with agriculture. When our nomadic ancestors began to settle and grow their own food, human society was forever changed. Not only did villages, towns and cities begin to flourish, but so did knowledge, the arts and the technological sciences.

And for most of history, society's connection to the land was intimate. Human communities, no matter how sophisticated, could not ignore the importance of agriculture. To be far from dependable sources of food was to risk malnutrition and starvation.

In modern times, however, many in the urban world have forgotten this fundamental connection. Insulated by the apparent abundance of food that has come from new technologies for the growing, transportation and storage of food, humanity's fundamental dependence on agriculture is often overlooked.

The upcoming World Food Summit serves as an important opportunity to reconsider the fundamental importance of agriculture - and the degree to which the global and independent nature of human society today requires a re-thinking of our attitudes and approaches to world food production and distribution.

Scheduled to be held from 13-17 November in Rome, the Summit seeks a renewal of an international commitment made in 1974 to eradicate "the most basic problem of mankind: food insecurity." The pledge was made at the first World Food Conference, which recognized that all people have a right to an adequate diet. Governments agreed to end hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity within a decade.

Since that resolution, progress toward food security has been made. In many nations, agricultural production has increased, food purchasing power has risen, and diets have improved.
However, advancement has been far from even. In 88 countries, a significant portion of the population - some 800 million people worldwide - continue to suffer from deficient diets. What is more, the drive toward food security has slowed in recent years. The rate of growth in agricultural production is declining; world grain reserves have fallen to record lows; the demand for imported grain is increasing; and commitments of aid to agricultural development have decreased. This against a backdrop of expanding world population, intensifying demands on agricultural resources, and a growing recognition that the agri-food system is not sustainable.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which is sponsoring the Summit, has expressed "deep concern" regarding the current and future status of the world's agri-food system, and called for immediate action at the national and international levels to attack the "root causes" of persistent food insecurity.

But what are the "root causes" of food insecurity? What policies and actions will contribute to eradicating food insecurity everywhere?

While there are obviously significant environmental and technical causes of food shortages, more significant are the underlying social causes. By many accounts, overall world food production is currently enough to provide everyone with a healthy and well balanced diet.

Yet fractured and unjust social systems, armed conflict, and narrowly nationalistic attitudes contribute greatly to inadequacies in food production, transportation, storage and distribution. It is no coincidence that nations suffering most from chronic malnutrition and food insecurity are also the most disrupted by war or civil strife.

Effective and lasting solutions to problems related to food insecurity will be found in policies and actions that pay adequate attention to those processes of development that aim primarily toward strengthening the human fabric of communities and revitalizing their institutions.

In talks and letters made some 80 years ago, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, outlined a bold vision for a unified global society that, rather than side-stepping the fundamental importance of agriculture, upholds the central importance of the farmer, the local community and its governing institutions in providing for the health and well-being of all of the members of society.

In this vision, spiritually motivated individuals contribute to strong families, organizations, corporations, administrative institutions and communities, animated by a new global ethic founded on universal spiritual principles such as unity, justice, equity, moderation and peacefulness. As working principles, these spiritual qualities enhance social cohesion.

"The fundamental basis of community is agriculture, tillage of the soil."

-- 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1912
More significantly, in relation to the question of food security, 'Abdu'l-Baha indicated that solutions to socio-economic problems begin at the village level. "The fundamental basis of community is agriculture, tillage of the soil," 'Abdu'l-Bahá said in 1912.

He advocated the establishment of community-based, elected institutions responsible for the development and regulation of resources, for social services, and for investment. Decision-making would be carried out through an enhanced consultative process involving all-inclusive participation of community members and the open, frank, and courteous airing of views. A full and fair consultative process contributes to community ownership of development. Participatory processes that are "owned" by the community are more effective, leading to self-reliance rather than dependency.

This vision goes beyond the prescription to "think globally, act locally." For while it emphasizes the proper development of the individual's intellectual, physical and spiritual capacities and his or her actions as the key to community revitalization, it also promotes the kind of institutions and systems of governance that are necessary to connect the individual and his or her actions firmly to a global and interdependent civilization. The impulse toward globalism is more than merely a state of mind.

This vision promotes an ethic of human solidarity that implies the precedence of the general welfare of humanity over national, racial, class, gender, and personal interests. The alleviation of human suffering becomes a universal goal, regardless of where that suffering occurs. Accordingly, effective global institutions are required to manage fair and equitable trade arrangements, equitably allocate resources, and ensure that prosperity is shared. These principles ensure that effective and appropriate technical solutions to food insecurity are developed and shared with those nations and people most in need.

For Bahá'ís, a community is more than the sum of its members. It is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families, and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies, and organizations that work together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders.

Ultimately, it is only through enhanced processes of social development which recognize the fundamental value of spiritual principles in education, community organization, and the application of technology that true food security can be established. It is necessarily a long term solution, but lays a firm foundation for a sustainable and secure food supply for all.