



Global Understanding

Food security, urbanization and agriculture's image impact us all.

by *Kindra Gordon*



Last fall, I had the opportunity to expand my knowledge of global agriculture while attending the Borlaug Dialogue International Symposium held in Des Moines, Iowa. This annual event is called the “premier conference in the world on global agriculture.” It is held in tribute to Iowa native Norman Borlaug, who prompted the Green Revolution and is credited with saving more than a billion lives with his development of improved, high yield wheat varieties that began to be grown in Mexico, Asia and Latin America in the 1950s and '60s.

Today, the Borlaug Dialogue features the humanitarian and agricultural efforts of researchers and philanthropists from around the world. Topics this year highlighted global initiatives in precision agriculture, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education for girls,

aquaculture, growing sweet potatoes to supply better nutrition to children in Africa and soil health. Speakers represented a cross-section of researchers, academia, government and humanitarian aid organizations from Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, Latin America and the United States.

For me, this was an experience outside my regular agriculture news coverage — I immediately noticed there were no beef researchers among the presenters, and I soon realized there was no beef (or pork) featured on the two-day meal menu either. This realization made me keenly aware that in America we take what one presenter coined as a “rich country's view” of global food and ag issues.

That said, I enjoyed the opportunity to learn, as we all should, about the ongoing, grassroots efforts around the world to solve global challenges related to food insecurity.

Poverty biggest problem

My first revelation came during remarks presented by David MacLennan, chairman and CEO of Cargill. He noted food scarcity is no longer the biggest problem at hand. Through increases in technology and knowledge, for the first time in history, the world has the capability of producing abundant crops to feed the population. This was a message repeated by several of the speakers and represents a major turning point in the global food revolution.

Therefore, the war against hunger today must focus on targeting poverty — many in the world live on a meager \$.80 to \$1.25/day. Along with that problem, the major challenge is providing impoverished individuals with access to food, as well as information and training, resources such as seed, and financing to improve their livelihood.

Eric Pohlman with the One Acre Fund in Africa reiterated this message, saying, “Farmers need distribution, training and finance.”

Pohlman made two additional remarks of interest. He pointed out that “the best distribution that exists on the planet is Coca-Cola” and noted that if agriculture could emulate that model as they work to distribute knowledge and resources, much progress could be made.

Additionally, he noted the cell phone will be a major tool in the future war against poverty and hunger. He shared that currently there are more cell phones on the planet than people. Cell phones are increasingly being used to provide production information and market prices to farmers across Africa, giving them opportunities to enhance their profitability.

That said, this development and use for cell phones also underscores the need for education of children in third-world countries, so they have the ability to read and understand the information that is increasingly becoming available to them. One speaker emphasized that children need proper nutrition so their minds are able to learn, as well.

Moving from “or” to “and”

One of the speakers I enjoyed most was James Borel, executive vice president for DuPont. Borel pointed out society today has developed an attitude that one choice must be good and the other bad — for example, pitting large versus small farms, organic or conventional methods, and crops grown with or without seed technology (GMOs).

In efforts to feed the world, Borel emphasized, “It’s not one or the other; we need to change ‘or’ to ‘and.’ We need large

“Farmers need distribution, training and finance.”

— Eric Pohlman

and small farms, we need organic and conventional, we need tech and non-tech.”

He also expressed that the world, and the agriculture industry, must move away from operating in “silos” and instead take more of a holistic view. He noted that it gets messy to talk with people who don’t share the same views, but added these conversations are occasions where innovation and creativity can be derived.

Additionally, Borel noted agriculture has a great story to tell, but we aren’t telling it enough. He noted we aren’t attracting the talent needed into

continued on page 82...



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David MacLennan, chairman and CEO of Cargill, says food scarcity is no longer the biggest problem at hand. Instead, the challenge is to provide the impoverished with food, information, training and the resources to improve their livelihood.



agriculture. He calls agriculture “the most exciting industry in our generation. We are the generation that must change ‘or’ to ‘and.’”

Mehmood Khan, vice chairman and chief scientific officer for PepsiCo, also addressed symposium attendees. He shared similar comments, saying, “When we stay in our own silos, nothing gets done.”

He, too, expressed the need to attract future scientists into agriculture and food. Khan reports that presently 50% of individuals with a career in science fields are over the age of 50 and there is not a generation on the sidelines to replace them.

Khan says his view of the future includes diversity of thought as well as action. He notes, “We are at the point in humankind where action is important or things won’t change. We can’t just talk, research and write. We must do.”

Urbanization occurring

Many of the international speakers noted a massive migration from rural to urban areas is occurring. Urbanization is reflective of improved circumstances for many people; they have jobs, income and better lives. With these, they will have the opportunity to improve their diet,

“Anything we do is a drop in the bucket... but together we can all put a lot of drops in the bucket.”

— Sheryl WuDunn

which represents a huge future opportunity for proteins — like beef, pork and poultry — to grow in demand as the global middle class grows in number.

That said, this migration is also reflective of fewer rural citizens to engage in production agriculture and to grow food. It’s already a challenge faced in the U.S., but it will increasingly be a challenge around the world.

One observation I made gives me hope for the future of agriculture. At least three speakers, one from the Netherlands, one from Finland, and Kahn initially pursued careers in medicine — they felt as a doctor they could “help people.”

Interestingly, however, each of them came to realize he or she could help even more people by being involved in food and agriculture, thus, altering his or her education and careers to do so.

To me, this offers positive insight for agriculture. With the agriculture advocacy efforts underway, as more people come to understand agriculture and the value the industry offers in providing essential food and nutrition for saving lives, perhaps one day agriculture — and farmers and ranchers — will truly be celebrated and respected for the vital role they have in sustaining the global population.



Urbanization reflects improved circumstances for many with jobs and income. As the global middle class grows, more will have opportunity to improve their diets and consume more proteins.

A second observation: Among the more than 700 attendees at the symposium, I was surrounded by more vegetarians than I have ever been exposed to before — vegetarianism being a choice many appear to have made because of their social conscience. A vegetarian diet is reflective of the simple diets of those in impoverished circumstances, and some implied beef production utilizes too many world resources and does not represent sustainable and environmental causes. I realized the job of helping promote understanding about the beef industry from production to nutritional benefit is needed more than ever.

A final observation came from an unexpected topic: sweet potatoes. A panel discussion highlighted the progress being made with child nutrition in Africa by getting more kids to consume sweet potatoes, which provide a high source of immunity-boosting Vitamin A. Interestingly, sweet potato consumption had been tried in the 1980s but didn't catch on. In the past decade, orange sweet potatoes, rather than white ones, were introduced, and women and children have been intrigued by the orange color. African women are being taught about the nutritional benefit. They've been given sweet potato vines to plant and have had successful crops, which gives them a healthy product to feed their children and a product to market to others, as well.



My takeaways to be applied to the beef industry from this: the nutritional story of a food product is powerful when it is shared with moms — they want a healthy future for their children. It's also a great reminder that sometimes an idea just needs to be tweaked and retried. Not many things are ever successful on first try.

The final message I took home came from Sheryl WuDunn, a Pulitzer Prize winner and coauthor of the book "A Path Appears." She noted, often when addressing global challenges, it feels they are so vast it is impossible to make a difference. But WuDunn encouraged attendees, saying, "Anything we do is a drop in the bucket...but together we can all put a lot of drops in the bucket."

WuDunn expressed that often addressing the small social issues makes the greatest change. She noted that building schools and providing uniforms are one aspect toward helping educate children, but it is in vain if those children are not healthy. A simple deworming treatment at a cost of \$3.50 per child may make the greatest impact in putting that child on a better path toward education. **HW**

Conservationist's view

An individual who is actively pursuing change in the world is farmer and philanthropist Howard Buffett, son of stock market mogul Warren Buffett. At the Borlaug Symposium, he joined a panel discussion on the topic of soil health, a cause Buffett is passionate about.

Buffett opened his remarks stating, "The greatest asset farmers have is under their feet — their soil. People think they are taking care of it, but they aren't. You can make a list of the top priorities among farm organizations in the U.S. and soil conservation won't show up. Conservation might be on the list, but it usually means something different."

He noted the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) is doing more in the area of soil health, but for Buffett the government's pace is not fast enough. He has research plots on many of his own properties on farmland across the U.S., as well as in Africa and South America. Of the soil health research being done, he takes this view: "I believe one thing we have to do is be realistic and practical with what we can get to the field."

Buffett says soil health requires minimal soil disturbance, continual cover, cover crops and rotation of crops. He also advocates reducing inputs and says, "You can do amazing things if you know how to use nature."

Buffett noted, changing practices to foster soil health is a mindset shift requires a learning curve. He says, "It's not easy to figure out — it's like rocket science, but once you figure it out, it is easy."

Buffett describes the roots of cover crops as "channels into the soil" as opposed to the compaction that machines create. He adds, "You are building an ecosystem under the soil."

His frustration is this, "many people say 'I tried no-till one year and it didn't work.' To me, that's like saying I tried marriage for a year and it didn't work. Nothing in ag works in one year. You've got to work at it and compromise."

He concluded, "I've been to every country in Africa. When you see children die [due to a lack of food], you realize you can and must farm better. That's why I am passionate about it. Status quo [farming] is unacceptable. When people throw stones at conservation agriculture, give me a better answer than 'I tried it one year and it didn't work.'" **HW**

