

The New Abolitionists

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The spate of articles about China's food needs, the increases in the price of wheat, and the concerns of population growth in the poor countries of the world, have converged to shake the world's unwarranted complacency towards the issue of food security. This makes the upcoming food security summit particularly timely. It is indeed important that the world reassess the prospects for achieving food security for all, and abolish the scandal of hunger in a world of plenty, as we enter the third millennium.

To do so, the world leaders who will meet in Rome later this year must be motivated by a sense of outrage, and they must understand the stakes correctly, and be appropriately informed about the issues in order to respond with the right actions. Herewith, a brief word about each of these topics so essential for the success of this very important summit.

It is inconceivable that there should be some 800 million persons going hungry in a world that can provide for that most basic of all human needs. In the last century, some people looked at the condition of slavery and said that it was monstrous and unconscionable. That it must be abolished. They were known as the abolitionists. They did not argue from economic self interest, but from moral outrage. Today the condition of hunger in a world of plenty is equally monstrous and unconscionable and must be abolished. We must become the "new abolitionists". We must, with the same zeal and moral outrage, attack the complacency that would turn a blind eye to this silent holocaust which claims some 40,000 hunger-related deaths every day.

The stakes ahead are enormous, and agriculture research stands at the heart of it. Yes, agricultural research. For agriculture is not only the means of producing food for the billions of humans on the planet, it is the key interface between humans and the natural environment. In the

developing countries, where 80% of the population live, agriculture accounts for about 70% of the land used, and 80% of the water. If agriculture is not intensified, in an environmentally appropriate fashion, then the sheer expansion of the population and its requirements will lead to the destruction of the forests from slash and burn farming of poor, small holders who eke out a meager living. The hillsides will be further colonized, and the soil further degraded and eroded. More water will be lost, and more will go hungry as they become environmental refugees. This will be our legacy if we do not transform agriculture.

Transforming agriculture, however, is just a small part of the overall equation. It must be done in a manner that benefits, even relies on, the small holder farmers of the developing world. That will reduce rural poverty, reduce vulnerability, and improve food security. Cheap food will also be critical as the single most direct and effective program for assisting the urban poor who have to purchase their food.

The transformation of agriculture is not going to happen without a sustained and continuing investment in agricultural research at the international and the national level. The private sector will not undertake some of the critical research essential to the promotion of sustainable agriculture for food security in the developing countries, because so much of it is of a public goods nature. That is why the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and national institutes in the developing countries must receive even greater support.

Beyond the production side is the access side. Special efforts to reduce poverty among the poorest of the poor remains absolutely essential, and access to resources is fundamental to improving their status. This is where the experience of micro-finance becomes so important. It is a means of promoting access, solidarity and reducing vulnerability among the very poor. The Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP) and similar instruments become essential tools to attack this problem.

Thus food security is not just about production, it is very much about poverty and this diagnosis is essential to adopting the right responses: agricultural research, access to credit, promotion of sustainable agriculture with special focus on the small-holder farmers, and above all an unremitting battle against poverty. These are the directions that the decision makers in Rome should pursue. The logic of the policies and programs must be matched by determined implementation. It is here that the sense of outrage must assert itself, if we are to truly act as the "new abolitionists".