

UN hunger expert warns of empty cupboard in 21st century

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

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A sobering wake-up call about global hunger was heard Monday afternoon in the Synod for Africa, delivered by a special guest invited to address the gathering: Senegalese diplomat Jacques Diouf, director general of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, which is based in Rome.

Diouf broke away to address the synod from an Oct. 12-13 FAO summit titled, "How to Feed the World in 2050."

World population is projected to rise to 9.1 billion in 2050 from a current 6.7 billion, Diouf said during the FAO summit, requiring a 70-percent increase in farm production. Increases, he said, would need to come mostly from yield growth and improved cropping intensity rather than from farming more land. Urbanization, desertification, the ever-greater share of land devoted to biofuels and global climate change, Diouf said, all make opening up new cropland increasingly difficult.

Without such significant increases in productivity, he warned, a rising population will find itself staring at an "empty cupboard," with significant increases in global hunger and malnutrition.

The problem, Diouf said, is not population increase in itself, because the resources clearly exist to feed a growing world. The problem is political will to apply those resources effectively and equitably.

With the bishops, Diouf added that by 2050, Africa alone will count two billion inhabitants — double its population today, thus exceeding India (1.6 billion) and China (1.4 billion), thus making Africa "the largest market of the world."

"Food safety is essential to the reduction of poverty," Diouf said, "but also to education public health, and durable economic growth. It conditions the stability and the safety of the world."

Yet Diouf warned that at the moment, things are actually getting worse rather than better, especially because of the global economic crisis of 2007-2008.

In Africa, he said, "the continent currently counts 271 million badly nourished people, which is to say 24 percent of the population, an increase of 12 percent compared to last year." Of the thirty nations currently considered to be in a food emergency, he said, twenty are in Africa. At the moment, increases in production are doing no more than keeping pace with population growth.

Noting that a disproportionate share of agricultural production across Africa is accomplished by women, Diouf said that no solution to world hunger will be possible without "taking into account of this economic and social reality."

Diouf ticked off a host of reasons why agriculture in Africa is struggling:

- Outdated infrastructure and means of production
- Low use of high-output seeds that fueled the "Green Revolution"
- Inadequate use of water resources for irrigation
- Weak networks of intra-regional trade

Remedying most of those conditions will require assistance from more developed nations, Diouf said, pointing out that the annual spending on armaments by those nations dwarfs their investment in hunger relief.

"We have sufficient financial means, technologies, and natural and human resources to eliminate hunger definitively from the world," he said, suggesting that what remains is largely a question of will.

In that regard, Diouf said, he's of one mind with the economic philosophy sketched by Pope Benedict XVI in his recent social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*: in order for the economy to function properly, it requires moral wisdom.

Diouf also struck a note of thanks to Catholic missionaries and lay activists, who are often in the front line of dealing with the consequences of hunger around the world.

"I want to also pay homage to the action of the church on the ground beside the poorest," he said. The missionaries, the nuns, and members of many communities often do a difficult, sometimes thankless work. "I want to greet these men and these women who I saw acting in many countries with discretion and effectiveness."

Diouf closed with a special plea for religious groups, especially Catholicism and Islam, to join forces in defense of the weakest peoples on the planet. That call was, in a sense, a case of form reinforcing function, since Diouf is a Muslim speaking to a room full of Catholics.

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