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World food systems called unsustainable for planet

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Nov. 4, 2010

Women prepare a plot of land for planting vegetables in 2008 as part of a group food security project in Yei, Southern Sudan. (CNS photo/Paul Jeffrey)

WASHINGTON -- The growing adoption of U.S.-style industrial farming practices worldwide puts too much stress on the planet and deceives people into thinking that the world will be able to keep feeding a growing population, currently 6.8 billion.

That was one of the main points raised at an Oct. 27 forum titled "Are We Eating Ourselves to Death?" It was sponsored by the Woodstock Center and held at Georgetown University.

Those reading the forum's title might think it was a symposium on eating disorders, said Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio, the program's moderator and a Woodstock Center senior research fellow. And in a sense it is, she added.

"We have an eating disorder that is affecting us nationally and internationally," Delio said. "The saying 'you are what you eat' has never had a more profound meaning than it has today."

Creating a more sustainable agricultural system poses a huge challenge, according to the forum's panelists, especially given all of the mechanized and monetized developments of recent generations.

Holy Cross Br. David Andrews, a senior representative for Food and Water Watch and for 13 years prior the executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, said other nations are adopting U.S-style farming practices not because they want to, but because they have to.

Andrews said it was World Bank- and International Monetary Fund-mandated "structural adjustment" policies that have knocked down vast areas of rainforest in a quest to grow exportable crops to pay back World Bank and IMF loans. Meanwhile, he said, indigenous people, who had practiced subsistence farming, are kicked off the land and have a harder time feeding themselves.

Complicating matters, Andrews added, is that U.S. subsidies for certain crops allow foreign markets to be flooded with those crops at prices that are cheaper than what local farmers can produce.

Such deforesting "costs us a whole lot in environmental repercussions," said Nancy Tuchman, a biology professor at Loyola University Chicago.

About 150 years ago, 98 percent of the U.S. population was involved in farming, according to Tuchman. Today, only about 2 percent is.

Because so few farm the land, it leads to, among other things, "monoculture" -- using all available acreage to grow just one crop -- and the use of pesticides and other chemicals, and now genetics, to increase crop yields.

Since Monsanto's Roundup weed killer kills everything that's green, the chemical giant has produced "Roundup Ready" seeds that won't be affected by Roundup. "So now you have the same company selling you the pesticide and the seeds," Tuchman said. "But you have to keep buying the seeds. Monsanto has inserted a 'suicide gene' that keeps farmers from using seeds from the crops they've grown" to use as seeds the following season.

The U.S. bishops, in their 2003 statement "For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers," "recognized that farming is a way of life," said Bishop Frank J. Dewane of Venice Fla., who grew up on a dairy farm near Green Bay, Wis.

Catholic social teaching, Dewane said, "must shape the global agriculture system," noting the "option for and with the poor."

Calling on his work with the Florida Catholic Conference Committee for Farmworker Justice and Immigration, he noted the plight of tomato pickers in southern Florida, many of whom are migrants and many of whom are women.

"They are poor, they are vulnerable," Dewane said of the tomato pickers. "If a woman is pregnant, she is not going to get any money if she doesn't go" into fields laced with pesticides that could harm her unborn child.

Andrews said some crops that receive U.S. subsidies are going to have to continue to receive them, but given the United States' looming budget deficits, the 2012 farm bill is "one place they're going to look" to find cost savings.

He also suggested educating women on sustainable farming and agriculture issues "because if you've educated the woman, you've educated her whole family."

Dewane, chairman of the rural life conference's board of directors, said economic development often results in smaller households, which could put less strain on the global food system.

But Tuchman said since that so many of the world's poor are malnourished, "we're trying to cut production and increase calories (consumption) at the same time. That's the problem....I don't know what the solution is."

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