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Published: October 07, 2009

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World Food Day: Citizens' of World Focus

By Rene Wadlow

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October 16 is the UN-designated World Food Day, the date chosen being the anniversary of the creation of the FAO in 1945 with the aim, as stated in its Constitution of "contributing towards an expanding world economy and ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger."

Freedom from hunger is not simply a technical matter to be solved with better seeds, fertilisers, cultivation practices and marketing. To achieve freedom from hunger for mankind, there is a need to eliminate poverty. The elimination of poverty must draw upon the ideas, skills and energies of whole societies and

requires the cooperation of all countries.

World Citizens have played an important role in efforts to improve agricultural production worldwide and especially to better the conditions of life of rural workers. Lord Boyd-Orr was the first director of the FAO; Josue de Castro was the independent President of the FAO Council in the 1950s when the FAO had an independent Council President. (The independent presidents have now been replaced by a national diplomat, rotating each year.

Governments are never happy with independent experts who are often too independent.) The World Citizen, Rene Dumont, an agricultural specialist, is largely the "father" of political ecology in France, having been the first Green Party candidate for the French Presidency in 1974.

As Lester Brown, the American agricultural specialist says " We are cutting trees faster than they can be regenerated, overgrazing rangelands and converting them into deserts, over pumping aquifers, and draining rivers dry. On our croplands, soil erosion exceeds new soil formation, slowly depriving the soil of its inherent fertility. We are taking fish from the ocean faster than they can reproduce."

To counter these trends, we need awareness and vision, an ethical standard which has the preservation of nature at its heart, and the political leadership to bring about the socio-economic changes needed. For the moment, awareness and vision are unequally spread.

In some countries, ecological awareness has led to beneficial changes and innovative technologies. In others, the governmental and social structures are disintegrating due to disease, population pressure upon limited resources, and a lack of social leadership. Worldwide, military spending, led by the USA, dwarfs spending on ecologically-sound development and the necessary expansion of education and health services.

As Lester Brown has written "The sector of the economy that seems likely to unravel first is food. Eroding soils, deteriorating rangelands, collapsing fisheries, falling water tables, and rising temperatures are converging to make it more difficult to expand food production fast enough to keep up with demand...food is fast becoming a national security issue as growth in the world harvest slows and falling water tables and rising temperatures hint at future shortages."

Yet there are agricultural techniques which can raise protein efficiency, raise land productivity, improve livestock use and produce second harvests on the same land. However, unless we quickly reverse the damaging trends that we have set in motion, we will see vast numbers of environmental refugees - people abandoning depleted aquifers and exhausted soils and those fleeing advancing deserts and rising seas.

David Seckler of the [redacted] writes "Many of the most populous countries of the world - China, India, Pakistan, Mexico, and nearly all the countries of the Middle East and North Africa - have literally been having a free ride over the past two or three decades by depleting their groundwater resources.

The penalty of mismanagement of this valuable resource is now coming due, and it is no exaggeration to say that the results could be catastrophic for these countries, and given their importance, for the world as a whole." Unfortunately, the [redacted] does not manage the world's use of water but can only study water use. While there are some planners who would like to be able to tax or make people pay for water, most water use is uncontrolled. Payment for water is a way



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that governments or private companies have to get more revenue, but the welfare of farmers is usually not a very high priority for them.

Yet as Citizens of the World have stressed, ecologically-sound development cannot be the result only of a plan, but rather of millions of individual actions to protect soil, conserve water, plant trees, use locally grown crops, reduce meat from our diets, protect biological diversity in forest areas, cut down the use of cars by increasing public transportation and living closer to one's work.

We need to stabilize and then reduce world population and to encourage better distribution of the world's population through planned migration and the creation of secondary cities to reduce the current growth of megacities. We need to encourage wise use of rural areas by diversifying employment in rural areas. We also need to develop ecological awareness through education so that these millions of wise individual decisions can be taken.

Lester Brown underlines the necessary link between knowledge and action. "Environmentally responsible behaviour also depends to a great extent on a capacity to understand basic scientific issues, such as the greenhouse effect or the ecological role of forests.

Lacking this, it is harder to grasp the link between fossil fuel burning and climate change or between tree cutting and the incidence of flooding or the loss of biological diversity...The deteriorating relationship between the global economy and the earth's ecosystem requires an all-out effort to bring literacy to all adults in order to break the poverty cycle and stabilize population."

Education and vision require leadership, and it is ecologically-sound political leadership that is badly lacking today. Former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair has called for "a new international consensus to protect our environment and combat the devastating impact of climate change." But it is likely that Blair will remain better known for participating in the war on Iraq than for leading governments to greater efforts to curb global warming. We have yet to see what European leadership will put forward at the UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Thus Citizens of the World are called upon to provide wise leadership to work for a redirection of financial resources to protect the planet, and to encourage ecologically-sound individual action.

Rene Wadlow, Representative to the UN, Geneva, Association of World Citizens

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