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Newsletter of SAVE A FAMILY PLAN (SAFP)

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Farmer Suicides in India Continue

by Amy Hogervorst, SAFP staff member

While farmers in India remain the largest body of small farmers in the world, the rate at which their numbers are declining because of suicide is truly shocking. In the last decade, over 160,000 farmers have ended their own lives, the majority by swallowing pesticide, in what has been called post-Independence India's greatest health disaster.

The problem of farmer suicides began to emerge in the late 1990s and increased rapidly in 2003-2004. Today, India is the suicide capital of the world. Many point a finger at the Indian government's failure to support farmers, while others blame big agribusiness, illegal moneylenders, climate change or just bad luck. The truth is that a number of factors contribute to the devastation of small farmers in India, but few have anything to do with simply bad luck.

In 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies opened the Indian seed sector to global agri-corporations. Companies such as Monsanto aggressively marketed specialized seed to farmers with advertisements featuring happy Indian farmers, movie stars and even popular deities. Further incentive for planting exotic seeds came from government loans and subsidies. However, the promise of greater yields and higher profits also came with unexpected costs and greater crop failure.

This community pond renovation project took place in the Wyanad District of Kerala, with the assistance of SAFP and Wyanad Social Service Society (Mananthavady). This agricultural area is experiencing water scarcity and crop loss due to poor land management and drought, and this SPED II-funded intervention was aimed at reconstructing a neglected head pond which, historically, had been a reliable perennial water source for the area.

There are several reasons why modified and foreign seeds have not worked in India. Traditionally, farmers save seed for the next year's crop; however, it is not legal to save patented seeds. Having to buy seed creates an additional cost at the beginning of every year. Furthermore, these seeds are not adapted (as the local varieties had been) to suit the specific Indian climates in which they are planted. They are also designed to be used with certain fertilizers, pesticides and regular irrigation. For many rural Indians, having water to drink is concern enough, let alone having to create new irrigation systems. Environmentally, the heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides, and the use of seed monocultures in place of crop variety and rotation, have led to soil degradation and threatened the natural biodiversity of local ecosystems. Varieties of farm-saved seeds, the natural products of evolution and farmer's breeding, have disappeared. This lack of diversity makes crop failure a greater risk.

Across the world, farmers face falling prices for farm produce as a result of World Trade Organization (WTO) policies on free trade that have allowed subsidized agricultural food products from developed nations to flood global markets. Even for those farmers who do manage to grow a good crop, subsidized competition and market liberalization leading to artificially cheap imported produce leave the farmer with little or negative profit.

Most farmer suicides have one thing in common: debt. Bank loans are not easily accessible for small or subsistence farmers and many turn to illegal money lenders who charge extremely high interest rates. Also, Indian farmers depend on monsoon rains, which, with increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, are not always reliable. When crops fail and debt is looming, farmers often see no way out. Furthermore, labour is not always affordable for the farmer. Although some simple environmentally sound technology could help, information and support for these practices are not always available. With all of these challenges, many farmers are losing hope. Bishop Sebastian Adayanthrath, President of SAFP India, observes that there is a "sense of general despair among the farmers; though they work very hard they cannot afford even the simple luxuries of life." Farmers have not only been robbed of their livelihoods; their role in community is collapsing, along with their sense of cultural and economic identity.

Although these problems have been especially devastating to Indian farmers in the last decade, different combinations of these problems have been plaguing small farmers all over the world for many years. Governments, the WTO, agri-corporations and other big players have created an economic architecture that works against small farmers. The World Bank (WB) even states in its *World Devlopment Report 2008* that an effective way to use agriculture for development is to "transfer land to the most productive users and to facilitate participation in the rural nonfarm sector and migration out of agriculture." Basically, as critic Raj Patel states in Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio's *Diet for a Hungry Planet*, WB policy supports the troubling notion that, "it's time for small farmers to leave their farms for the cities."

In her 2005 book, *Earth Democracy*, Vandana Shiva, Indian writer and activist, suggests that what has happened in rural India is more than 160,000 cases of suicide: "The WTO rules on agriculture are a deliberately designed policy to destroy small farmers and shift agriculture into the hands of agribusiness. The trade rules inflict on our small farmers conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction as sovereign producers. WTO policies

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are, hence, a genocide on small farmers."

So, where is the hope?
In India, many farmers and even states are turning to non-pesticide management and/or organic alternatives, and attempts are being made to preserve and redistribute populations of traditional seed. Large protests have been organized against the use of genetically modified seed. Awareness of the values of naturally and locally grown foods is spreading. New movements are beginning.

SAFP recognizes that poverty reduction can only be realized when actions and interventions promote and support sustainable livelihoods. Working directly with the members of rural communities through our local partners in India, SAFP has been able to respond to the needs of the poor, including struggling farmers. Strategic initiatives have included skill-building and environmental awareness training, as well as support for: water and soil conservation measures; wetland reclamation; well, pond and quarry recharging; organic farming; group-farming efforts; bio-village/green plots; fodder cultivation; promotion of azolla (sustainable livestock fodder); trichoderma use (an eco-friendly bio-fungicide); promotion of dolomitic limestone use (to replenish soil); and vermi-composting.

In 2000, the Indian Farmers' Movement (INFAM) was organized by struggling farmers in Kerala in response to the effects of WTO policies. INFAM is involved in such things as creating public awareness and political pressure; saving indigenous seed species; promoting multi-crop cultivation, organic farming and modern farming techniques; and preserving Indian small-farm culture. This organization is coordinated by Tellicherry Social Service Society, a SAFP partner.

Right: Lack of water for irrigation is a major issue in Kallunganguru village in the Shimoga District in Karnataka state. With the assistance of SAFP and Shimoga Social Service Society, this Environmental Protection Committee was formed. SPED II funding has been used in this watershed area for field bunding, farm ponds, tree planting, gully plugs, house repairs, sanitary latrines, organic farming, and income generating projects.

The "Better Aid Bill" – Good Move Canada!

by Amy Hogervorst, SAFP staff member

For the last few years, the Make Poverty History Campaign and concerned citizens have been calling for more and better international development aid. On May 29th, 2008, Bill C-293 (Official Development Assistance (ODA) Accountability Act) became an exceptional new part of the law of Canada. This "Better Aid Bill", introduced back in May 2006 by Canadian Member of Parliament John McKay, creates three enforceable rules when it comes to the way Canada spends foreign aid money:

Firstly, aid has to be clearly directed at **reducing poverty**. Canada has often been criticized about the "militarization" of aid spending. As Canadian Senator Romeo Dallaire, the persistent sponsor of this bill (and former Commander in charge of UN forces in Rwanda) writes, the Canadian government has had a "longstanding practice of fudging its reporting of ODA amounts by including monies spent on foreign security operations, reconstruction and development—objectives that serve our national interests instead of the interests of the world's poor."

A landless family living in this shed in Vellilulam village, Kerala.was targeted for assistance by SAFP partner Palai Social Welfare Society

Secondly, ODA will have to be delivered in a way that **promotes international human rights standards**. This "rights-based approach" to development is valuable because it identifies those parties with duties to uphold human rights, rather than identifying only those in need. Furthermore, it encourages greater empowerment, ownership and participation of those rights-holders in the development process. These are essential to creating sustainable improvement.

Finally, the Better Aid Bill will ensure that Canada's ODA takes into account the **priorities and needs of those who are actually living in poverty**, rather than the priorities of the donor. Until now, Canada's "tied aid" has been given with the condition that the supplies for development or other needs must be purchased from the donor country. As Gerry Barr, Executive Director of theCanadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), points out, this takes about 30 cents off of every aid dollar that is supposed to be held in trust for the poor. With the new legislation, Canadian aid will be worth more and will be focusssed on addressing the real needs of the marginalized. Bill C-293 will also oblige the Minister in charge of foreign aid to report more fully and frequently on all aid spending, bringing greater transparency and accountability to Canadian ODA. This will include an account of Canadian contributions to decision-making at meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (both highly powerful institutions that have been criticized for the conditions they place on their loan assistance to developing nations). Bill C-239 will bring incredible changes to how Canadian dollars affect the global community. **Save A Family Plan (SAFP)**, a recipient of those dollars through the Partnership Branch of the Canadian International Development Agency, has been using aid dollars effectively for many years. SAFP's Community Development Program in India responds directly to locally identified needs in poor rural communities. Through participatory planning and the strengthening of individuals and organizations through training and education, long-term development results are guaranteed–this is exactly what foreign aid investment should hope to accomplish.

Food Crisis

by Laurie Chan, SAFP staff member

At the recent United Nations (UN) High Level Conference on World Food Security in Rome (June, 2008), representatives of 180 countries discussed soaring food prices and the effects of climate change on agriculture. The objective of the conference was to assist the international community in finding sustainable solutions to these threats to world food security. It concluded with the adoption of a declaration calling on the international community to increase assistance for developing countries, in particular the least developed countries and those that are most negatively affected by high food prices.

In a July 3, 2008 statement to the European Parliament in Brussels, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director-General Jacques Diouf said that **the number of hungry people increased by about 50 million in 2007 as a result of high food prices**. "Poor countries are feeling the serious impact of soaring food and energy prices," Dr. Diouf said. "We urgently need new and stronger partnerships to address the growing food security problems in poor countries…..Donor countries, international institutions, governments of developing countries, civil society and the private sector have an important role to play in the global fight against hunger." (source: http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2008/1000866/index.html)

"We firmly resolve to use all means to alleviate the suffering caused by the current crisis, to stimulate food production and to increase investment in agriculture, to address obstacles to food access and to use the planet's resources sustainably, for present and future generations. We commit to eliminating hunger and to securing food for all today and tomorrow."

from the United Nations Declaration on World Food Security, June 2008

This petty shop was developed as a SPED II-supported sustainable livelihood initiative for a woman with two children who had been infected with HIV/AIDS by her husband, who later abandoned her. Trivandrum Social Service Society has worked with SAFP to facilitate such initiatives for similarly affected families in Kerala.

World market prices for major food commodities such as grains and vegetable oils have risen more than 60 percent from two years ago. The implications are great. Food-share spending is inversely related to income levels; high-income consumers spend a much smaller percentage of their income on food, compared to low-income consumers. In addition, low-income families use a significantly higher percentage of staples in their diet (corn, wheat, rice, and soybeans), which are the food commodities most affected by market volatility. From an economic and health perspective, it is therefore the poor who are most at risk in the current food crisis. High food prices have resulted in widespread social unrest, mostly in low-income, food-deficit countries such as Haiti, Bangladesh, and many African nations.

In rural India, **Save A Family Plan** and local partners continue to work with the poor and marginalized to build their capacity to earn income so that they can hope for a healthy future. The UN's vow to "alleviate the suffering" requires immediate action, so that the progress that has been made in developing successful sustainable livelihoods among vulnerable populations is not compromised.

WHAT'S CAUSING HIGH FOOD PRICES?

- over the past decades, a gradual slowing of production growth due to conversion of agricultural land, soil degradation, and reduced access to water for irrigation
- weather-related production shortfalls (eg. crop losses from flooding, drought, freezing, etc.)
- reduction in global stock levels
- increasing oil prices (resulting in higher costs for fuel , fertilizer, freight, etc.)
- growing biofuels market and implementation of public policies that support this market (eg. subsidies to the industry), which increases demand and results in conversion of food crops
- strong global economic growth, especially rapid for China and India
- globally, rising population together with strong growth in average income has led to increased demand for food
- higher per capita incomes have led to diversification of diets (eg. greater demand for dairy/ meat protein) leading to increased demand for feedgrains for livestock
- financial flow into the futures market causing price volatility (encouraged by trade liberalization and market deregulation)
- short-term policy action for consumer protection, such as export bans, increased export taxes, and reduced import tariffs leading to increasing market volatility
- exchange rate fluctuation - appreciation of currencies against a weakened American dollar has resulted in greater demand for cheaper commodity imports from the U.S.
- reduced agricultural research and development: budgeted government support for agriculture in many developing countries has weakened in the past decades, due in part to trade liberalization and imposed structural adjustment measures
- international aid targeted specifically for agricultural development has decreased significantly

A Policy Brief (May 2008) from the Canadian Food Security Policy Group[1] includes the following statements:

- Make agriculture a specific sector priority at CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) ... Focus these resources on supporting small holder farmers to sustainably strengthen their livelihoods and adapt to climate change.
- Support international agricultural trade rules that respect the human right to food and promote the development of small farmer food production in developing countries.
- Examine new or reformed mechanisms to reduce the volatility of international food commodity prices.

[1] Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, Canadian Council for International Co-operation, Canadian Foodgrains Bank, CHF – partners in rural development, ETC Group, Farm Radio International, Inter Pares, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam Quebec, United Church of Canada, UPA Développement international, USC Canada

In 2006/07, 3.4 % of the world's arable land was used to grow feedstock for biofuel

World Hunger

by Father Ronald Trojcak

When I was asked to write a piece for this bulletin, I immediately chose world hunger as my subject. But, the more I thought about it, the more intimidating the task appeared because of the unprecedented gravity and enormity of the current food shortage. I am sorely uncredentialled to speak of the nature or causes of this enormous problem. In fact, I can hardly offer a precise description of it. I am not an agronomist or a meteorologist, or a sociologist. And I am certainly not an economist. I've only the vaguest understanding of the International Monetary Fund or the World Trade Organization, whose power and presence in this matter seem paramount. And I'm afraid that my understanding, in any precise sense, of globalization is, likely, hopelessly imprecise.

So where do I stand in this world? I am a white, middle-class male, an academic on the farther side of middle age. I am a roman clergy person, a theologian and, I hope above all, I am a Christian wannabe, as in the text of that splendid spiritual, "Lord, I want to be a Christian inna my heart."

In consequence of this, I carry with me, most of the time, a nagging recollection of those terrifying words from the first letter of John: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (I John, 3/17) It is because of the unrelenting insistence and urgency of these words that "globalization" takes on a real, immediate, if somewhat idiosyncratic, meaning for me.

It is the global reality of hunger and critical food shortage that the newspapers and television commentators mediate, even when, as is often the case, their attention to this matter is perfunctory and short-lived. Nevertheless the words and the terrifying statistics, often casually thrown off, together with countless images of stick-thin children and adults, do mediate this world to me, making inescapable the fact that they and I live on the same globe.

Moreover, the text from John helps me to discriminate between the (too few) notices of world hunger and the near-nuttiness of ads: for the next "reality" series, for greater sexual prowess, or for the fifty or sixty brands of tooth paste, hair conditioner, or deodorant currently on offer. In other words, the johannine text not only makes the world and world hunger real, it also enables me to recognize, and to dismiss the frivolity of so much of what seems real and central in the list of concerns of us over-fed, self-pampered members of the "developed" world. (The text also causes me to question the very notion of "development." Surely my world is not a morally or religiously developed one.) And even more immediately, the knowledge that two-thirds of the world is hungry, and desperately so, gives a new poignancy to the constant battle I wage with the expansion of my paunch. Indeed, the text illuminates the breathtakingly scandalous reality of our attempt to use corn, not to feed people, but to satisfy our insatiable appetite for fuel for our cars. (The development of corn-based ethanol has removed corn from the "food chain," and raised the price of corn drastically, together with the price of those other grains, wheat and rice, which are the staple food for most of humankind.)

I really do wish I knew more about global economics, and I intend to educate myself more fully on the causes of the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, the over-fed and the under-fed…or even non-fed…on this planet. Such knowledge is invaluable. But, for the present moment, I need to respond to the words from John, and those from the judgment scene in Matthew: "for I was hungry and you gave me food," (Mt. 25/35) even if I can't now, adequately account for the reasons why there is such massive hunger.

What does one now do then? How about we begin by reconnecting with our own food and supporting our local small farmers who are often facing some of the same problems as small farmers across the globe. Or, rather than buy the latest fashion or electronic gizmo, we might look into how our money would be put to use by one of the many, many organizations looking to ease the hunger pangs and strengthen the voices of those most strongly feeling the effects of this excalating food crisis.

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Live Simply. Simply Live! It sounds great, doesn't it? Sometimes things are not the necessity or even the comfort that they are marketed to be. Ultimately, material possessions result in dependency and in destructive consequences for the planet and its living things.

Free up your life and enjoy simplicity.

Kindly recycle this newsletter by sharing it with a friend.

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