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Globalization and Agricultural Sustainability

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GLOBALIZATION AND AGRICULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Global agriculture responded to increased food demand over the last fifty years by developing chemical-intensive, high yielding, mechanized farming systems, and the expansion of agricultural lands. Global food demand is still increasing and there are serious concerns about sustainable food supply, environmental quality, and human health. It is important to examine globalization from the perspective of agricultural sustainability and environmental quality.

The USDA's Economic Research Service Report on "the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Rural Economy", released on August 2002, concluded some important environmental concerns. One of the concerns was the NAFTA rule allowing firms to sue member governments for compensation for "expropriation of an investment" which may limit country's ability to enact and enforce strict environmental laws. Other concerns included trade liberalization creating incentives for countries to attract capital by lowering environmental standards, increased risk of introducing non-indigenous species and diseases, and increased transportation and fuel usage contributing to more pollution. The report says, "Trade liberalization undoubtedly reinforces a shift to crops in which a country possesses a comparative advantage, but predicting this shift and its environmental impact poses a significant challenge". It is evident that agricultural production for global market requires capital-intensive, large-scale production technologies such as intensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, irrigation, improved hybrid seeds, and the heavy use of machinery. In countries where diversified multiple cropping systems exist, crop specialization results in a loss of biodiversity, displacement of small-scale farming, greater amounts of pesticide use and increased dependence of farmers on multinational companies for their production inputs and agricultural marketing.

On BBC Reith Lectures 2000, Vandana Shiva talks on "Poverty and Globalization" and presents depressing facts of increased farmers' suicides in India. In her first paragraph she says, "Recently, I was visiting Bhatinda in Punjab because of an epidemic of farmers' suicide. Punjab used to be the most prosperous agricultural region in India. Today every farmer is in debt and despair. And as an old farmer pointed out, even the trees have stopped bearing fruit because of heavy use of pesticides have killed the pollinators - the bees and butterflies." She reported similar ecological and social disaster in Warangal, Andhra Pradesh, India, where farmers introduced hybrid cottonseeds. According to her, in Warangal "The cost of pesticide use has shot up from \$2.5 million in the 1980s to \$50 million in 1997". This extraordinary increase in pesticide use certainly will have long-term impacts on soil, water, and human health in the region.

Prof. John E. Ikerd, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, U.S.A., on his online paper "Farming in the Future: The Triple Bottom Line" talks about the U.S. farm financial crisis of the 1980s. He says, "Many farmers had borrowed heavily at record high interest rates to expand production to meet booming export demand during the 1970s, only to see exports dry up, commodity prices plummet, and record farm profits turned into disastrous farm losses." He further says, "Losing a family farm is like losing a member of the family, or losing one's self; perhaps, that's why the thoughts

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or so many farmers turned to suicide at the prospect of losing their farms". Farmers who stayed with their diversified farming system that did not require them to borrow money to purchase expensive chemicals and farm equipment could cope with the serious economic farm crisis. At present, member countries in "free trade" are increasingly supporting their farmers involved in global agricultural commodities through interest free loans, disaster relief payments, or farm improvement subsidies. For example, in NAFTA countries where agricultural commodities have low prices since 1998, the participating governments have increased governmental assistance to their producers. According to USDA NAFTA Report, the U.S. Congress appropriated a total amount of \$25.9 billion as a direct payment to assist farmers in FY 1998, 1999, and 2000, while it was just \$6.4 billion per year during FY's 1996-1997. In 2000 the amount of direct payment to Canadian farmers was Can\$2.8 billion, which was 42% above their 1999 level. The report says, "In general, Mexico has not followed the U.S. and Canadian lead in increasing support to agricultural producers during the ongoing farm crisis".

Lower domestic market prices are cited as one of the virtues of globalization. However, lower market prices are often associated with the collapse of local industries. For example, as The Daily Advertiser, December 29, 2004, reports the U.S. shrimp industry struggled so long to survive as dumping of shrimp from Brazil, Ecuador, India, Thailand, China, and Vietnam devastated domestic shrimp production. Recent governmental support on tariffs on cheap foreign shrimp has brought back hope to the U.S. shrimp industry. Sugar producers are another group of U.S. farmers who are struggling for their survival due to adverse impacts of Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Other countries are also reporting similar dumping and its negative consequences on local industry. On a one-day seminar on "Impact of WTO and Globalization on Nepalese Agriculture", November 20, 2001, Mr. Biswa Nath Tiwari pointed out that "Developed markets have dumped their surplus products like milk powder which has discouraged our own dairy farmers".

Even long after their accession to World Trade Organization (WTO), several developing countries are still hesitant to tear down their barriers of "free trade". For example, the Philippines reportedly still has a very high tax on imported vegetables, even though its domestic vegetable market prices are quite high.

Bio-safety of agricultural produce is increasingly becoming a major concern. In the future producers, processors, and marketing agents may be required to keep detailed records of agricultural commodities that they are involved with. Through these records, producers, processors, and marketing agents can be tracked down when there are outbreaks of food borne diseases or any contamination. Along with existing sanitary and phytosanitary conditions, these record-keeping requirements, if imposed in the future, will preclude many producers, processors, and marketing agents especially in developing countries to take part in global trade.

Globalization has certainly helped member countries to increase foreign investment and agricultural exports, generate employment opportunities, and satisfy consumers by making available exotic agricultural produce and by lowering market prices for ordinary agricultural commodities. But, it is clearly driving global agriculture into unsustainable chemical-based, monoculture with adverse impacts on biophysical, socio-economic, and institutional dimensions of a local, regional, and national agriculture.

Lester R. Brown on his article "Growing.Growing.Gone?" published in Mother Earth News, December/January, 2004, stated, "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." He reported that more than 100 countries import part of their wheat and about 40 countries import rice. The United States controls close to half of world grain export. As population is increasing demand for grains will rise and the prices will climb. According to Mr. Brown, "For the world's poor - the millions living in cities on \$1 per day or less and already spending 70% of their income on food - rising grain prices would be life-threatening. A doubling of world grain prices today could impoverish more people in a shorter period of time than any event in history." This clearly indicates how important it is for a nation to have sustainable food production to meet its food requirement.

Sustainable food production requires healthy soils, a strong natural resource-base, diversified farming systems, appropriate production

technologies, sustained farm income, a strong social structure, and environmental quality. Agricultural research and education should focus on sustainable food production practices and methods such as soil and water conservation, integrated pest management, nutrient management, waste recycling, organic farming, sustainable/appropriate technology development, integrated farming systems, and farm diversification. Local food production, processing, and distribution systems should be strengthened. Land distribution and land rights are still the major problem in many developing countries. Unless farmers are granted with lands and land rights, efforts on long-term improvement of lands and sustainable crop production will not be possible. Farmers and local stakeholders should be involved in planning, management, and implementation of resources management policies and programs. National agricultural policies should safeguard agricultural production, processing, and marketing systems that enhance agricultural sustainability and environmental quality.

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