

ORANGEVILLE CITIZEN

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From the Global Classroom

‘Together We Stand . . .’

Doug Skeates , 24/3/2011



The second part of that expression, “Divided we fall”, may be more apt as the world becomes more divisive and millions are ‘falling’. One of the greatest problems facing mankind is hunger and we have failed to come together, i.e. to even come close to solving it. The gap between the rich and the poor has become immense and is increasing. This is well known in our own country but the problem is even more severe between nations. How are we going to feed nine billion people in 2045 when we’re facing tremendous difficulties today being unable to cope with hunger for even seven billion.

The English language is rapidly evolving as at least various disciplines are coming together. Biofuels. Eco-tourism. Socio-economics. One of the most meaningful for me is agro-forestry where farmers and foresters appear to combine, both concerned in the business (literally) of land use. Unfortunately foresters traditionally have concentrated on manufacture of wood products and the farming community is at the mercy of marketing forces. The field (pun intended) of hunger in which the two professions need to be working more closely together is lost in the world of commerce.

This is not necessarily the case in some parts of the world. We were fortunate to have lived in Kenya where rural livelihood was based on the ‘shamba’ system, whereby forest villages were established in the highlands. The labour force was converting rainforest to plantations using farm production as intermediate methodology. Each worker was annually allocated about an acre of land. Initially the forest was cut and the land planted to crops to feed his family and/or provide revenue. In the third year trees were planted while food crops were maintained between the rows. Crop production continued into the fourth year until trees took over. Subsequent employment consisted of thinning and pruning trees. At any point in time labourers had four areas in crops plus annual forestry work.

The 2011 issue of “State of the World” focuses on ‘Innovations that Nourish the Planet’. The major point is the difference between the ‘Green Revolution, boosting grain production, and what is seen as a long term solution the authors called the ‘Revolution of Greens’. The former was highly successful in the short term increasing food supply and financial prosperity for chemical fertilizer and pesticide manufacturers but negatively affecting soil nutrient potential.

With ever reducing productive capacity the problem of global hunger increased in the long term. The emphasis required is a change in emphasis from quantity of grain to quality of greens based on increasing soil organic content.

A Canadian experience in northern Ontario provided an insight. This was a seed tree cut in a forest of top quality white spruce. Using bull-dozers to clear the site mineral soil was exposed for seed germination resulting in over 50,000 new seedlings per acre. Eventually it was realized that tree roots failed to grow into mineral soil but only developed properly in organic soil. Seedlings failed to prosper until an organic layer of litter built up. Shrubs and plants evolved after clearing providing litter each year along with branches and annual leaf fall from newly developing trees.

The key feature is fertility from increased organic content in the soil. An example was a United Church of Canada aid program visited in Tanzania which provided a cow for each family in a village. A stable was built to contain the animal. Grass was cut daily for feed rather than leaving the cow free to browse. Milk was always at hand for family nutrition or for providing income. Manure collected in the stable helped provide organic fertilizer for the vegetable garden and for increasing fertility in the grassland adjacent to the home. The result was healthier children from increased production of greens from the garden and more productive grassland.

Surveys consistently showed that farmers were seeking aid to increase soil fertility. Nitrogenfixing leguminous trees, shrubs and plants added organic content helping to increase production of green foods. Increasing supply of vegetables in the family diet was having a beneficial effect on health particularly for the children thus improving their learning capability A 'revolution of greens'.