

THE POLITICS FACING THE INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (IAASTD) REPORT

A Presentation Prepared for the International Rural Church Network Meeting in Altenkirchen, Germany, September 20-26, 2010.

By: Winston G. Carroo, Executive Director, Agricultural Missions, Inc

In a few words, the politics facing this report is very significant, very negative and mostly being played out indirectly.

It is important to note here that much of the politics that the report faces has been with us for a long time prior to its publication. This is what I mean. The report strongly advocates alternatives to the current system of food and agriculture that has existed for decades, and that is seen by the authors as unsustainable and even dangerous. The current system has the support of corporate interests and their political surrogates in the halls of political power. This system is essential to their survival and they spare no effort and expense in maintaining the status quo. In this sense, the politics facing the report is not directed specifically at the report, but in maintaining a system that the report essentially suggests be dismantled if justice and sustainability are to be achieved. This is clearly demonstrated when we understand that most people have never heard of this report – even those in politics and business who are opposed to changing the system as it exists.

This is where I will begin this discussion, because we must understand that the failure to promote the findings of this report is an example of the political and economic interests that is widespread and common in all sectors – not only in food and agriculture.

If we look at two recent very big news events we will clearly see the close relationship between big business interests and government that is illustrative of the politics facing this report. The first of these events is oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The BP oil spill exposed the cozy relationship between the oil industry and the Minerals Management Service (MMS), the federal government's regulatory agency. In this case, the regulators, for the most part, are former industry employees who are very sympathetic to the industry rather than to the public interest. As a result, regulations were not followed and mandated safeguards not in place at the time of the accident, with the knowledge of the regulators. The rest, as they say, is history. The second case and closer to home in terms of food, is the recall of over five hundred million eggs for salmonella contamination. This is a direct result of concentration within the egg industry resulting in mega production facilities and the commercialization of food production and distribution using the industrial model. With the support of politicians, the poultry and hog industries in the United States have seen rapid concentration in the past decade, resulting in mega 'factory farms', with significant environmental and potential health threats. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that purportedly has the mandate to protect the public from unsafe foods and medicines, but the agency has no power to recall products until after someone is harmed.

Public television recently ran a story that stated the agency's mandate and operating rules have not changed since it was started 70 years ago. Consider these facts:

1. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimated over 75 million people in the United States get sick each year from contaminated food, of which 3,000 – 4,000 will die and 300,000 hospitalized.

2. The food safety allocation of the agency's total budget declined from 50% in the 1970s to 25%, currently.
3. There are only 8,000 inspections per year of the 150,000 food processing facilities, resulting in less than 5% of these facilities being inspected on an annual basis. This coupled with the fact that less than 1% of imported food is inspected by the agency, presents substantial risk to the consumer, resulting in a string of food contamination incidents in the past year.

In response to the recent episodes of contaminated food, the congress is currently considering new legislation that would grant the FDA a new mandate to regulate the nation's food supply, but this has been bogged down, partly by the food industry's objections, championed in the legislature by politicians who received contributions from the industry.

These examples illustrate is the influence the business sector has, not only on the legislation, but also on the implementation and enforcement of the regulations.

By now you must be wondering why I am going into all of this when I should be talking about the IAASTD report. The reason is simply this: those opposed to the report's findings and its emphasis on sustainable methods represent big business interests in agri-business and life science sectors. The politics facing the report comes mainly from these sources, although the report itself is not mentioned. This illustrates that even in the absence of the report, efforts to change an entrenched system, such as the agriculture and food systems, face very strong opposition from very powerful sources in business and their allies in government.

By way of a specific example of the politics facing the report, I would just like to mention the Lugar-Casey bill which is a classic case study in the interlocking interests of big business, big philanthropy, US foreign policy and US aid – all of which seem opposed to what the report implies. New developments in the international political economy threaten to use the global food crisis as an opening to solidify genetic engineering as a necessary part of food security strategies.

In 2009, the U.S. senate foreign relations committee approved the Lugar-Casey Global Food Security Act, which seeks to reform aid programs to focus on long-term agricultural development and the restructuring of aid agencies for better crisis response. This piece of legislation mandates funding for genetic engineering (GE) research. In fact, earlier versions of the bill specifically mentions the Monsanto Corporation, the kingpin of crop related genetic engineering, as the entity to receive government funding for research. While the emphasis on GE remained in the final version of the bill, Monsanto was not named specifically. It might surprise you to know that this bill received the support of CARE, Oxfam, Bread For The World, and US land grant colleges, among others. In his opening statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Lugar argued that worldwide food security is critical to US national security, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sudan where he says hunger has fueled conflict and extremism. Lugar believes that agricultural development in these “troubled” regions will ensure more peaceful conditions. Bill Gates and Bill Clinton expressed their support for the highly controversial, pro-GE Lugar-Casey bill in their testimonies before the senate foreign relations committee. Now that the global food shortage theory has been discredited, proponents of the agri – business model are now dragging in the national security argument as a way of perpetuating the current system.

But the discredited arguments continue. We are being told over and over that the world currently faces a food shortage of catastrophic dimensions that will worsen

in the future. We are also told that the only way to solve this problem is through the use of GE products along with the chemical and water inputs they require. Despite these assertions, the fact is that enough food is currently being produced to adequately feed the world's population. The problem is one of equitable access. Some have too much and some do not have enough. Hunger is a symptom of poverty and not an absolute shortage of food.

In appeasing national security priorities and corporate interests, the Lugar-Casey bill overlooks key findings (IAASTD), which concludes that agro-ecological methods (research, extension and farming) offer enormous potential, and that a multi-faceted approach to agriculture is needed, rather than a narrow focus of GE technologies on higher yields and nutritional enhancement.

Lest we forget, the politics facing was even present in the multi-stake holder process of the report itself. This should come as no surprise given the wide range of views, philosophies and interests represented among the stakeholders. The biotechnology and chemical industry group left the process prior to the final plenary that was held in Johannesburg in April of 2008, in protest over the synthesis report on biotechnology. These industries, with a primarily focus on productivity and profit, were at odds with the major conclusions of the report, in particular the conclusions supporting the:

- Multi-functional role of agriculture and recognition of the productivity of small farms and household gardens.
- Failure of the current "one size fits all" approach of industrial agriculture to end hunger and poverty while causing extensive and perhaps irreversible damage to the environment.
- Fact that alleviation of poverty and hunger will require a paradigm shift that includes location specific solutions involving low technology and low or no cost strategies, at least initially.

These major conclusions are at odds with the goals, practices and beliefs of the agricultural biotechnology and chemical companies.

Considering that this was a UN sponsored process, one would imagine that this report would be highly promoted within in the agencies related to agriculture, food and rural development. However, the opposite seems to be case, especially within FAO, which was criticized for not including a discussion of the IAASTD in its high level forum on “how to feed the world in 2050”, held in October last year. Currently, the FAO seems to be supporting the hi tech approach, including biotech and synthetic chemical approach to food production.

The World Bank was another sponsor of this process, but it is inconceivable that they will promote the findings of the report, given their institutional culture in promoting mega projects and current efforts to promote the land grabs and large scale agriculture projects in Africa and other developing regions and countries.

Both FAO and the World Bank support Land grabs, which have greatly increased since the food price crisis emerged a couple years ago. In this process, wealthy countries are buying or leasing farmland in poor countries, not to produce food, raw materials and bio energy products for local use, but for export to their own countries or for export to other wealthy countries. These controversial land grabs threaten local food security, hurt local workers and ecosystems, and dangerously tip the scale of the world's food economy. While the full extent of these land grabs is still unknown, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) reports that over 49 million acres of farmland were subject to such deals between 2006 and 2009. A recently leaked World Bank report, cited in the Financial Times, indicates that these farmland investors are “targeting countries with weak laws, buying arable land on the cheap and failing to deliver on promises of jobs and investment.”

What I have discussed so far regarding the politics facing the report, is the situation as it obtains in the United States and within the multi-lateral

organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. The politics facing the report on the international level is very much the same. In the age of globalization the same special interests are transnational and dominate on the national and global levels. The World Trade Organization (WTO) framework provides the cover for agriculture and food related interests to expand across national borders, with the cooperation and even facilitation of the international financial institutions, aid programs and some large philanthropic interests, primarily the Gates Foundation. These entities are very hard at work lobbying and influencing agricultural and food policy and practice in developing countries.

The international dimensions of the politics facing the report certainly includes the observations I just made on FAO's and the World Bank's apparent position. Only 58 nations accepted the report when it was presented in 2008. Most others were absent from the presentation of the report, although not opposed to it. However, the United States, Canada and Australia did not approve the executive summary of the synthesis report, as they did not agree with the assertions, options and conclusions of the synthesis and regional reports.

With all of the politics facing the report, I do think that the failure to promote the findings and options is probably the most significant limiting factor to its acceptance and implementation. Most government agencies and public sector employees in developing countries are not aware of the existence of the report, even though it was a United Nations supported effort. Its use in guiding the policy making functions of the relevant sectors is being supplanted by aggressive marketing and special favors offered by corporate interests.

The report is very popular and very often quoted in certain circles of interested persons and organizations. It is certainly well known among food and agriculture activist organizations (NGOs), academics and practitioners of sustainable agriculture and agro-ecology. As I indicated previously, this report is not widely distributed and used by policy makers and planners in the public sector and

many ministers of agriculture in developing countries are not even aware of its existence, which is very unfortunate. Many are pursuing the “business as usual model” that the report warned must end.

Whether by design or coincidence, the findings of the report are essential for achieving justice, stability and peace in developing countries, particularly since the food price crisis began. This crisis resulted in riots and political instability in several countries and led to the downfall of at least one government. The seeds of this crisis were sown over the past decades and were nurtured by a combination of the “business as usual” model of industrial agriculture, food aid, the WTO and the policies of the World Bank and IMF. Working independently or together, these programs and institutions caused a decline in subsistence agriculture and food production in developing countries and an increase in dependence on food imports. While many of these countries have vowed to increase food production, they are promoting the “business as usual model” of large scale, capital intensive methods and practices, rather than those options offered in the report.

In the industrialized countries where population growth and unemployment are much lower than in the less industrialized countries, the existence of a vibrant and viable subsistence agricultural economy is essential for social justice and therefore social peace. In these less industrialized countries, where the majority of the population is relatively young and birthrates are high, the public and private sectors cannot provide enough jobs to keep pace with the number of persons entering the work force each year. As a result, most people find ways to make a living through petty trading, farming or a combination of both. Governments are seeking ways to provide employment opportunities for the population even while the unemployment rates continue to rise due to the natural growth of the population. While the agricultural sector provides a high percentage of the employment and most of the population lives in rural areas, these facts are not reflected in the budgetary allocations made to these sectors.

For the most part, governments in the developing countries are seeking foreign investment in large-scale agricultural projects that promise employment opportunities and other social amenities. The land grabs I described earlier is one strategy being used by these countries, out of desperation. This “business as usual” strategy might work in the short term only if promises were kept. But the reality is that these projects displace local farmers, occupy the best agricultural lands, consume a lot of water and other resources, pollute the environment and provide very few jobs and do not fulfill promises made for social amenities.

While the governments make concessions to these foreign entities, very minimal or no support is given to small subsistence farmers in terms of inputs, infrastructure and extension services. In countries that have experienced civil wars in recent times, villagers are slow to return to the rural areas due to a lack of support and incentives for doing so. The result is overcrowded slums in urban areas that lack the essential services and amenities for a decent quality of life that are conducive to social peace.

It is very baffling and disappointing that the report is not being used more widely to guide the planning and decision-making regarding the issues of food, agriculture and rural development. Implementing programs based on the options presented in the report would clearly be better in terms of promoting social justice and peace and cost much less than the “business as usual” approach that is currently receiving most of the attention and resources.

I would just like to give you a brief description of one of a program we are implementing in West Africa that is consistent with the report and demonstrates the value of subsistence agriculture in maintaining social peace and stability. The program is called the West Africa Initiative (WAI) and is in its third year of implementation in Liberia and Sierra Leone, with the active participation of local partners. This program is funded by the Presbyterian Church (USA) the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ. Agricultural Missions, as a

matter of philosophy and practice, does not deploy staff in partner communities, but works to support local partners. In response to the identified needs for development of local leadership, capacity building of partners and the lack of inputs, the program focuses on the following areas:

- Capacity of local partners to develop and design rural development programs
- Training of local facilitators
- Training of farmers
- Providing inputs (seeds, tools, etc) to community groups for food production
- Building of local community organizations to assume responsibility for the activities (exit strategy). This is a critical element of this program.

Both these countries have suffered extended and brutal civil wars that left the rural areas depopulated, the agricultural sector destroyed along with much of the physical and social infrastructure.

In three years, the program has trained and supported 17 community facilitators/animators who are working in 20 communities, trained over 200 community based farmer-extension workers and provided inputs and training benefiting over 5000 farm families.

The fourth and final year will focus on building the economic base to continue the program with minimal external support.

From the social peace aspect, we are told over and over by the people participating that “we are not forced to steal from our neighbors to get food” and “we were enemies during the war, but now we are building this community together, we have to protect and not destroy it”.

But this is less than a drop in the bucket and the program does not portend or claim to have significant impact on the national or even regional scale. However, the local communities have seen the benefit of not using the “business as usual” approach. Now if only the governments will.