

Food, Agriculture, and Human Dignity

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy should respect and support the dignity of the human person, the integrity of creation, and our common humanity.

Introduction

As people of faith committed to social and economic justice, it is imperative that our food and agricultural system is in line with our ethical principles. The food and agricultural system should support the dignity of the human person, the integrity of creation, and our common humanity. Unfortunately, the current system does not quite measure up. This section looks at the reasons why.

Dignity of the Human Person

Right to Food

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that every person has the right to food. More broadly defined, every person has the right to an adequate amount of nutritious food, through production or purchase, to sustain a dignified human life. Guaranteeing **food security** – when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life – is one way to ensure the right to food.

Despite decades of domestic and international initiatives, 852 million people on earth are still hungry. One of the main reasons for this continued epidemic is that our current agricultural system is driven by large corporations, banks, and individuals, whose primary goal is profit, not feeding people. The current profit motives of the food system deny access to food for those without the necessary economic resources, in turn infringing on the human right to food. **Food is not the same as any other commodity.** It differs from shoes and cars because it is necessary for survival. Therefore, the allocation of food should not be decided by market

forces alone. A significant shift in the current food and agricultural system will need to be made to ensure that everyone has access to adequate food to be able to reach their full human potential and contribute to the development of their community.

Agricultural Sector Workers

Finding justice in the food system is an especially difficult task for agricultural sector workers. Farmworkers in the U.S., many of whom are immigrants looking for ways to improve their lives and the lives of their families, often face inhumane treatment. And for farmworkers in the Global South, many of whom are small farmers who were forced off of their land, working conditions are usually even worse.

- Farmworkers in the U.S. are some of the lowest paid employees in the workforce, often earning **annual incomes below \$10,000.**
- Under federal law, farmworkers are not guaranteed overtime pay when they work more than 40 hours in a week and are **not guaranteed the right to organize themselves.**
- Farmworkers are often exposed to hazardous pesticides and other chemicals that can lead to serious **health problems.**
- Many farmworkers do not receive medical insurance from their employers, which means that they are not able to get the health assistance they need or are forced to spend much of their income on medical care.

Improving the treatment of farmworkers needs to be a core part of reforming the agricultural system.

Integrity of Creation

Corporate Consolidation

Respect and support for the integrity of creation requires that the vast resources on earth, including agricultural resources, are shared in a just manner. The heightened levels of corporate consolidation that have occurred over the past decades within the international food and agricultural system threaten the equitable distribution of agricultural resources. In fact, the current organization of the food system closely resembles an oligopoly. An oligopoly is when a small number of firms control enough of a given market to set prices for consumers above their competitive level.

- In 2002, only two corporations, Monsanto and DuPont, controlled 65% of the global seed markets for maize, excluding China.
- While nearly three quarters of all human food is grain-based, four corporations – Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Louis Dreyfus, and Bunge – controlled approximately 73% of the global grain trade in 2003.

High levels of agribusiness consolidation have been combined with a trend toward **vertical integration** within the industry. Vertical integration is when firms begin to control more of the process, from “field to table,” in a given market. When put together, consolidation and vertical integration create an environment where it is possible for large corporations to manipulate the prices that consumers pay while at the same time driving down the prices paid to farmers. By driving down the incomes of farmers while food prices continue to rise, the highly concentrated and vertically integrated food system is one contributing factor to the perpetuation of hunger and poverty.

Common Humanity

Rural Development

Agricultural policy plays a central role in rural development and has the potential to promote our common humanity, the ability of all people and

communities to reach their fullest potential. Unfortunately, there is still much work to be done to reduce poverty in rural areas in the U.S. and around the world. As larger farmers become more powerful and agribusiness continues to consolidate, the trend has been that family farmers in the Global North and small farmers in the Global South have gone out of business. For family farmers in the Global North, this has meant needing to find “off-farm” work.

- Currently, less than 10% of rural Americans live on farms.
- Only 2% of rural Americans earn their primary income from farming.
- As much as 89% of the income for farm households came from “off farm” sources in 2003.

It is important to note, however, that this displacement of farmers to “off-farm” jobs often comes out of necessity, not desire. A similar trend of displacement from rural communities to urban areas and other countries can be seen throughout the Global South. Current rural development policies are not meeting the needs of rural people, which in turn threatens our common humanity.

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