

FAO: Cut population to save environment

by Marion Schwaneberg Peretti

With the scientific knowledge at our disposal today, we could, if we wanted to, make the deserts bloom, feed twice the present world population, and fight the poverty, hunger, and disease which afflict a large part of the world, by the end of the 20th century.

However, a conference of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization which took place over April 15-19 in 's Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, spurned precisely those opportunities that science and technology invite us to use. Despite the recent warnings by the Rome-based FAO that famines are to be expected in the 1990s, the conference called not for a high-technology food output mobilization, but for low-input, "sustainable" farming.

'Sustainable' for whom?

The discussions during the conference served as a basic reference for all the agro-environmental questions which will be on the table at the U.N. conference on "Environment and Development" scheduled for 1992 in Brazil, whose agriculture theme will be that farming, especially Third World agriculture, must become "sustainable" for the environment.

The global strategy of the conference proposed controlling the demographic "explosion," placing greater attention on the introduction of low-input farming systems, and reducing imputed potentially negative consequences of high-technology agriculture. The conference "permits" a choice between high-yield farming systems with widespread use of fertilizers, and traditional systems of farm production used by the majority of peasants in the world.

Although the problem was identified that debt and the disparity in the distribution of resources penalize farmers of the poorer countries, the conference's strategy was to call into question the benefits of modern technology: "Technology has made a considerable contribution to agricultural production, but it has also contributed to the degradation of resources, above all to the drying up of the soil. If we continue at the present rate, by the year 2000 the annual loss of fertile soils will be 10 million hectares (0.7% of presently cultivated areas)."

This makes a mockery of the reality that impoverishment

of farmers in Latin America and Africa over the last 20 years has resulted in reduced food availability per capita, to the point where now cholera and other epidemics are spreading out of control. While millions are dying because of the lack of development, the FAO has nothing better to do than worry about how people might "pollute" by cultivating the earth.

The North Carolina malthusians

Among the various documents which were presented at the conference, one particularly odious piece was called "Population, the Environment, Sustainable Agriculture, and Rural Development." It was prepared by the Carolina Population Center of the University of North Carolina, by M.E. Billsborrow and M.E. Geores, followers of the 19th-century genocidalist Thomas Malthus and his modern-day disciples at the Club of Rome. The sole concern of the North Carolina group is the effect of growth in population on the use of land and on the environment in developing countries, where, it is asserted, most of the less usable land is found. This categorization refers to regions such as the Amazon Basin in South America, and areas in Central Africa and in Indonesia. The lands in these tropical forests are fragile and not very fertile, and they do not stand up well to traditional farming methods.

In other endangered zones, according to the North Carolina malthusians, "the growing population density" seems to contribute to desertification and soil erosion, which threatens the "sustainability of agriculture and human survival."

Elsewhere in the document, we read that it is crucial to impose a policy for redistribution of land that will prevent poor families from occupying land designated as unsuitable, such as those tropical zones mentioned. Without such prohibitions and other similar measures, there will be no way to guarantee the "sustainability" of agriculture with the environment. Even then, the authors contend that "sustainability" may not be possible without population reduction.

They reiterate that developing countries "must significantly reduce the future rate of growth in population." They also request that surveys and censuses be undertaken in rural areas to gather more data on the relationship between farming activity and the environment.

The document's authors refer to Malthus and his modern followers, such as Paul Ehrlich and Erik Eckholm, who succeed, in their contempt for human capacities, in going beyond Malthus by asserting that "population growth is one of the principal causes for the deterioration of the environment in the world, including deforestation, desertification, and the degradation of the soil."

The North Carolina group attacks a researcher, one Professor Boserup, who defied the premise of "constant technology" of David Ricardo and Malthus by stating that the Earth, in correspondence with the growth of population, could be cultivated in a more intensive way. That is exactly what the FAO appears determined to prevent.