



Takeaways from a Global Conversation

Borlaug Dialogue International Symposium gives insight to global food security and tips for beef industry.

Commentary by Kindra Gordon, field editor

In October I had the opportunity to expand my knowledge of global agriculture while attending the Borlaug Dialogue International Symposium in Des Moines, Iowa. This annual event is called the “premier conference in the world on global agriculture.” It is convened in tribute to Iowa native Norman Borlaug, who prompted the Green Revolution and is credited with saving more than a billion lives with his development of improved, high-yield wheat varieties that began to be grown in Mexico, Asia and Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today, the Borlaug Dialogue features the humanitarian and agricultural efforts of researchers and philanthropists from around the world. Topics this year highlighted global initiatives in precision agriculture, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) Education for Girls, aquaculture, growing sweet potatoes to supply better nutrition to children in Africa, and soil health.

For me, this was an experience very much outside of my regular ag news coverage. I immediately noticed there were no beef researchers among the presenters, and I soon realized there was no beef [or pork] featured on the two-day meal menu either. It made me keenly aware that we in America take what one presenter coined as a “rich country’s view” of global food and ag issues.

With that said, I enjoyed the opportunity to learn, as we all should, about the ongoing, on-the-ground efforts around the world to solve global challenges related to food insecurity.

My first revelation came during remarks presented by David MacLennan, chairman and CEO of Cargill. He noted that food scarcity is no longer the biggest problem at hand. Through increases in technology and knowledge, for the first time in history the world has the capability of producing abundant crops to feed the population. This was a message repeated by several speakers, and it represents a major turning point in the global food revolution.

Instead, the war against hunger today must focus on targeting poverty. Many in the world live on a meager 80¢ to \$1.25 per day. Along with that, the major challenge is providing impoverished individuals with access to food, as well as information/training, resources (such as seed) and financing to improve their livelihood.

Eric Pohlman of One Acre Fund in Africa reiterated this, saying, “Farmers need distribution, training and finance.”

Pohlman made two additional remarks of interest.

“The best distribution that exists on the planet is Coca-Cola,” he said, noting that if agriculture could emulate that as they work to distribute knowledge and resources, much progress could be made.

Pohlman also said the cell phone will be a major tool in the future war against poverty and hunger. He shared that currently there are more cell phones on the planet than people. Cell phones are increasingly being used to provide production information and

market prices to farmers across Africa, giving them opportunities to enhance their profitability.

That underscores the need for education of children in Third World countries, so

they have the ability to read and understand the information that is increasingly becoming available to them. Many emphasized that children need proper nutrition so their minds are able to learn.

“We can’t just talk, research and write; we must do.”

— Mehmood Khan

Moving from ‘or’ to ‘and’

One of the speakers I enjoyed most was James Borel, executive vice president for DuPont. Borel pointed out that society today has developed an attitude that one choice must be good and the other bad — for example, pitting large vs. small farms, organic or conventional, and crops grown with seed technology [genetically modified organisms (GMOs)] or those that are not.

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 118

Takeaways from a Global Conversation CONTINUED FROM PAGE 116

farms, we need organic and conventional, we need tech and non-tech,” emphasized Borel, commenting on efforts to feed the world.

He also expressed that the world — and the ag industry — must move away from operating in “silos” and instead take more of a holistic view. He noted that it gets messy to talk to people who don’t share the same views, but added that is where innovation and creativity can be derived.

Additionally, Borel said agriculture has a great story to tell, but we aren’t telling it enough. He also noted we aren’t attracting the talent we need into agriculture. He calls agriculture “the most exciting industry in our generation,” and concluded, “We are the generation that must change ‘or’ to ‘and.’”

Mehmood Khan, vice chairman and chief scientific officer for PepsiCo, also addressed symposium attendees. He shared similar comments, saying, “When we stay in our own silos, nothing gets done.”

He expressed the need to attract future scientists into agriculture and food. Khan reports that currently 50% of individuals with a career in science fields are older than 50, and there is not a generation on the sidelines to replace them.

Khan says his view of the future includes diversity of thought, as well as action.

“We are at the point in humankind where action is important or things won’t change,” he said. “We can’t just talk, research and write; we must do.”

Conservationists view

An individual who is actively pursuing change in the world is farmer and philanthropist Howard Buffett, son of stock-market mogul Warren Buffett. He joined a panel discussion on the topic of soil health, a cause Buffett is passionate about. A farmer from South America and one from Africa were also on the panel and shared that efforts in no-till farming are being implemented in their countries.

Buffett opened his remarks stating, “The greatest asset farmers have is under their feet — their soil. People think they are taking care of it, but they aren’t. You can make a list of the top priorities among farm organizations in the U.S., and soil conservation won’t show up. Conservation

might be on the list, but it usually means something different.”

He noted that USDA is doing more in the area of soil health, but for Buffett the government’s pace is not fast enough. Buffett has research plots on many of his own properties on farmland across the United States, as well as in Africa and South America. Of the soil health research being done, he takes this view: “I believe one thing we have to do is be realistic and practical with what we can get to the field.”

Buffett says soil health requires minimal soil disturbance, continual cover/crop, and rotation of crops. He also advocates reducing inputs and says, “You can do amazing things if you know how to use nature.”

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— Howard Buffett

Changing practices to foster soil health is a shift in mind-set and requires a learning curve, says Buffett. “It’s not easy to figure out. It’s like rocket science, but once you figure it out, it is easy.”

Buffett describes the roots of cover crops as “channels into the soil” as opposed to the compaction that machines create. He adds, “You are building an ecosystem under the soil.”

His frustration is this: “Many people say ‘I tried no-till one year and it didn’t work.’ To me, that’s like saying I tried marriage for a year and it didn’t work. Nothing in ag works in one year. You [have] to work at it and compromise.”

He concluded, “I’ve been in every country in Africa. When you see children die [due to a lack of food], you realize you can and must farm better. That’s why I am passionate about it. Status quo [farming] is unacceptable. When people throw stones at conservation agriculture, give me a better answer than, ‘I tried it one year and it didn’t work.’”

Final points

The topic of urbanization was touched on by many of the international speakers, noting that a massive migration from rural to urban is occurring. Urbanization is reflective of improved circumstances for many people; they have jobs and income and better lives. With this, they will have the opportunity to improve their diet, which represents huge future opportunity for proteins — like beef, pork and poultry — to grow in demand as the global middle class grows in number.

With that said, it also is reflective of fewer rural citizens to engage in production agriculture and grow the food. It’s already a challenge faced here in the United States, but

fewer farmers will increasingly be a challenge to be addressed around the world.

A final message that I took home came from Sheryl WuDunn, a Pulitzer Prize winner and co-author of the book *A Path Appears*. She noted that sometimes when addressing global challenges it feels they are so vast it is impossible to make a difference. Yet WuDunn encouraged attendees saying, “Anything we do is a drop in the bucket ... but together we can all put a lot of drops in the bucket.”

WuDunn also expressed that often addressing the small social issues makes the greatest change. She noted that building schools and providing uniforms are one aspect toward helping educate kids, but it is in vain if those kids are not healthy. A simple deworming treatment at a cost of \$3.50 per child may make the greatest impact in putting that child on a better path toward education.

The International Symposium was convened in conjunction with the presentation of the World Food Prize, which recognizes the achievements of one individual annually for their work to advance human development by improving the quality, quantity or availability of food in the world. Initiated in 1987, the World Food Prize is considered by many to be the equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize for food and agriculture.

This year’s laureate was Sir Fazle Hasan Abed of Bangladesh. The \$250,000 prize honored Abed’s achievement in building the integrated development organization Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), which is headquartered in Bangladesh and operates programs in 10 other countries around the globe.

Created more than 40 years ago, Abed’s organization has been hailed as the most effective anti-poverty organization in the world. It operates 18 financially and socially profitable enterprises across health, agriculture, livestock, fisheries, education, green energy, printing and retail sectors, and has been responsible for extraordinary advancements in the poultry, seed and dairy industries — providing the opportunity for nearly 150 million people worldwide to improve their lives.

It was evident to see Abed’s passion and dedication in his work, and witness that one person can create a ripple effect that truly can make a difference in the world.



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.*

Additional observations

Speakers at the Borlaug Dialogue International Symposium represented a cross-section of researchers, academia, government and humanitarian aid organizations from Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, Latin America and the United States.

One observation gives me hope for the future of agriculture. At least three speakers — one from the Netherlands; one from Finland; and Mehmood Kahn, a U.S. executive with PepsiCo — initially pursued careers in medicine. They felt that as a doctor they could “help people.” Interestingly, however, each came to realize they could help more people by being involved in food and agriculture and, thus, they altered their education and careers to do so.

To me, this offers positive insight for agriculture. With the ag advocacy efforts under way, as more people come to understand agriculture and the value the ag industry offers in providing the essential food and nutrition for saving lives, perhaps one day agriculture — and farmers and ranchers — will truly be celebrated and respected for the important role they have in sustaining the world population.

A second observation: Among the more than 700 attendees at the symposium, I was among more vegetarians than I have ever been exposed to before — a choice many appear to have made because of their social conscience. A vegetarian diet is reflective of the simple diets of those in impoverished circumstances, and some implied beef production utilizes too many world resources and does not represent sustainable and environmental causes. I realized the job of helping promote understanding about the beef industry from production to nutritional benefit is needed more than ever.

A final observation came from an unexpected topic: sweet potatoes. A panel discussion highlighted the progress being made with child nutrition in Africa by getting more kids to consume sweet potatoes, which provide a high source of immunity-boosting Vitamin A. Interestingly, sweet-potato consumption had been tried in the 1980s but didn’t catch on. In the past decade, the orange sweet potato — rather than white ones — were introduced, and women and children have been intrigued by the orange color. African women are being taught about the nutritional benefit, they’ve been given sweet potato vines to plant and they have had successful crops, which gives them a healthy product to feed their children and a product to market to others.

My takeaway to be applied to the beef industry from this is: The nutritional story of a food product is powerful when it is shared with mothers. They want a healthy future for their children. It’s also a great reminder that sometimes an idea just needs to be tweaked and retried. As Howard Buffett underscored during his remarks, not many things are ever successful on the first try.