

The 2011 State of the World report focuses on advances in sustainable agriculture

Rich Heffern | Feb. 7, 2011 | Eco Catholic

The Worldwatch Institute's State of the World report has been released for 2010. In the preface, Christopher Flavin, Worldwatch president, focuses on innovations in world agriculture over the last ten years, saying that these moves forward have been "an impressive success story."

He writes: "Efforts to raise crop yields by investing in new agricultural technologies and infrastructure have met many of their immediate goals. Productivity has risen steadily in major grain producers such as Australia and the United States, while large areas of Asia, including China, have succeeded in raising yields and thereby reducing rural poverty and hunger."

Another part of the story is that agriculture has advanced little in much of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where national governments and the international community have underinvested in agriculture over the past several decades. "The failure to advance agriculture in some of the world's poorest regions has made it impossible for rural economies to develop, leaving hundreds of millions stuck in a cycle of poverty."

Until recently most policymakers believed that the only route to advancing agriculture in these places was to accelerate the so-called Green Revolution "provide more productive seeds and fertilizer and thereby raise yields. In many cases this has not worked.

Flavin writes: "Fortunately, the notion that world hunger can be eliminated with money and technology alone is being discredited not just by its own shortcomings, but by exciting evidence that new approaches to building a sustainable, nourishing agricultural system can effectively supplement and replace the innovations found in the standard agricultural toolbox.

"This is particularly true in sub-Saharan Africa, where thousands of small farmers are drawing on ancient cultural wisdom, along with clever new technologies, to produce abundant food while devastating neither local soils nor the global ecosystem."

The 2011 State of the World focuses on these innovations in sustainable agriculture and is well worth reading.

Some of the highlights and low points in 2010 are chronicled in the Year in Review section of the Report.

-- The United Nations reports that 36 million people were displaced by natural disasters in 2009, with more than 20 million forced to move due to climate change-related factors.

-- A transportation study reports that global production of cars and light trucks dropped 13 percent in 2009, the second consecutive year of such declines.

-- U. S. government approves the \$1 billion Cape Wind project off the coast of Massachusetts, the nation's first offshore wind farm.

-- Scientists report that deforestation in Brazil's Amazon is creating better habitat for mosquitoes, leading to a 48 percent increase in malaria cases in one surveyed county.

-- The U. N. General Assembly declares access to clean water and sanitation a human right, voicing deep concern that 900 million people worldwide lack access to safe drinking water.

-- German researchers report that global carbon dioxide emissions fell 1.3 percent in 2009 ? due to economic recession and renewable energy investments.

-- U. N. reports that the number of hungry people in the world has dropped to 925 million, down from 1.02 billion in 2009 but still unacceptably high.

-- Researchers say that distributing new varieties of drought-resistant maize to African farmers could save more than \$1.5 billion and boost yields up 25 percent by 2016.

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