



About Jim Harkness

Jim Harkness joined IATP as president in July 2006. Previously he served as Executive Director of the World Wildlife Fund in China from 1999–2005. He has written and spoken frequently on China and sustainable development, and has served as an adviser for the World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

Climate change demands a new way to feed the world

REMARKS OF JIM HARKNESS, PRESIDENT, IATP
DIÁLOGO CLIMÁTICO, CANCÚN, MEXICO

CANCÚN, DECEMBER 5, 2010 — I would first like to thank our Mexican hosts and say what an honor it is to appear with such an inspiring group of farm leaders from around the world.

We are here in Cancún because climate change threatens the livelihoods of farmers and the food supply of our planet. We are also here because some of the solutions to climate change being proposed this week in the Moon Palace (where the official negotiations are taking place) will themselves undermine global food security and the rights of farmers in the global South. I would like to talk briefly about these false solutions, and where they came from.

For the past 50 years, American farmers have been told by chemical companies and agribusinesses—even by their own government—that they must adopt chemical and industrial farming and focus on growing as much food as possible, in order to “feed the world.” (It is no coincidence that “feed the world” was also a marketing slogan of the Archer Daniels Midland Corporation.) Government policies, programs and research all supported this agenda.

As mountains of grain piled up in the U.S., our government used food aid to gain political power over developing countries and build their dependency on food imports. Over the last 30 years, the U.S. has used the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other free trade agreements to force open markets, and undermine food security in the global South, so that today more than two-thirds of the world’s poorest nations are dependent on food imports.

We know this strategy did not in fact feed the world, but I want everyone here to realize that neither did it help the majority of American farmers or consumers. During the past 50 years, the vast majority of America’s family farmers were forced into debt and off of the land. Today, in my country, there are more people in prison than there are growing food. Profits from farming are captured by agribusiness and food companies, and our entire food system, from the farm to the dinner table, depends heavily on the exploitation of people of color.

Instead of fresh and healthy food, our industrial farming system produces raw materials that are processed into inexpensive products with extremely low nutritional value. Indeed, the U.S. has actually invented a new type of malnutrition, characterized not by inadequate caloric intake but by overconsumption of unhealthy, empty calories. We have the highest obesity rate in the world, and this deadly condition is especially prevalent among the poor and communities of color.

In short, industrial agriculture and corporate globalization have undermined food security and farmer livelihoods worldwide. And we are here in Cancún, because this model of development is also producing a global climate catastrophe. The International Panel on Climate Change tells us that agriculture and the land-use changes associated with it are responsible for over 30 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. But we in the climate justice movement have to look at that figure critically. We know that not all farming is equal in its responsibility for emissions. The biggest culprits are not Mexican peasants or Kenyan Masai cattle herders or fishers in the Philippines. They are the massive factory farms producing oceans of manure, fossil-fuel intensive commercial farms, and the industrial oil palm plantations and other non-food crops that replace forests and displace peasants leaving them no choice but to open up new lands for farming.

Given this reality, it is troubling to see that both in the U.S. and here in Cancún, the very model of agriculture that has played such a central role in creating the climate crisis is being put forward as a solution to that crisis. Global trade in industrial biofuels, chemical no-till agriculture, genetically modified (GMO) crops, and eucalyptus plantations for biochar are not “climate-smart agriculture.” They are Trojan horses for the latest corporate campaign for control of the world’s resources.

There is already ample evidence that these risky technologies don’t actually reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but even if they could, we need to ask ourselves, “At what cost?” Yes, agriculture can sequester carbon in soils, but that is just one of its functions for humanity. Farming makes human life on the planet possible—it feeds the world. And it provides a livelihood for over two billion people. It is more than that, though. Farming is a sacred relationship between humans and the earth, and a way of life that supports rich cultures and vibrant rural communities all over the world. In order to have a significant impact on global greenhouse gas emissions, the massive technological and engineering schemes being put forward by agribusiness would use so much arable land, displace so many people, and have such devastating environmental and social side effects that the costs would far outweigh any benefits.

There is an effort by some countries to push forward with a sectoral agreement on agriculture in the climate negotiations that would focus on using agriculture in the global South to mitigate emissions in the North. This would drastically increase incentives for all of the false solutions I have described, and it would allow polluters to evade their responsibility to reduce their own emissions.

Instead, the international community must focus its attention on policies and financial resources to support adaptation among the smallholder farmers in the global South who grow over 70 percent of the earth’s food. And as you are hearing from my fellow panelists, those farmers are already cooling the planet through their ecological stewardship and low-input farming.

In closing, I would just like to remind everyone here of the three major reasons why the global community agreed in 1992 that we urgently needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions: 1.) To ensure that global food production is not disrupted. 2.) To allow ecosystems to adapt. And, 3.) To enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.

The key to all of these laudable, global goals is to support the rights and needs of family farmers and ecological agriculture.

Thank you!