WHO OWNS THE EARTH?
Land Ownership And The Quality Of Human Life

BY MARY ANN SMITH, M.M.

The question of who owns the land has a critical effect on the quality of life and may spell the difference between hunger and poverty or health and well-being. Increasingly, the arable land around the world is flowing into the hands of a few corporate elites. Consider the following facts and consequences of this trend:

United States

Small family farms in the United States declined from 6.8 million in 1935 to 2.3 million in 1974[1]* and continue to go out of existence at alarming rates. The large agribusinesses that have bought up these farms can now virtually control the food supply in the U.S. and abroad. "Five percent of U.S. farmers now control more than fifty percent of U.S. agricultural land; the eight largest energy companies own 65 million acres; timber companies control 43 million acres; railroads 23 million."[2] This concentration of land ownerhip has led to significant social dislocation, to urban slums, unemployment and higher food costs. In addition, food has been used as a weapon in U.S. foreign policy.

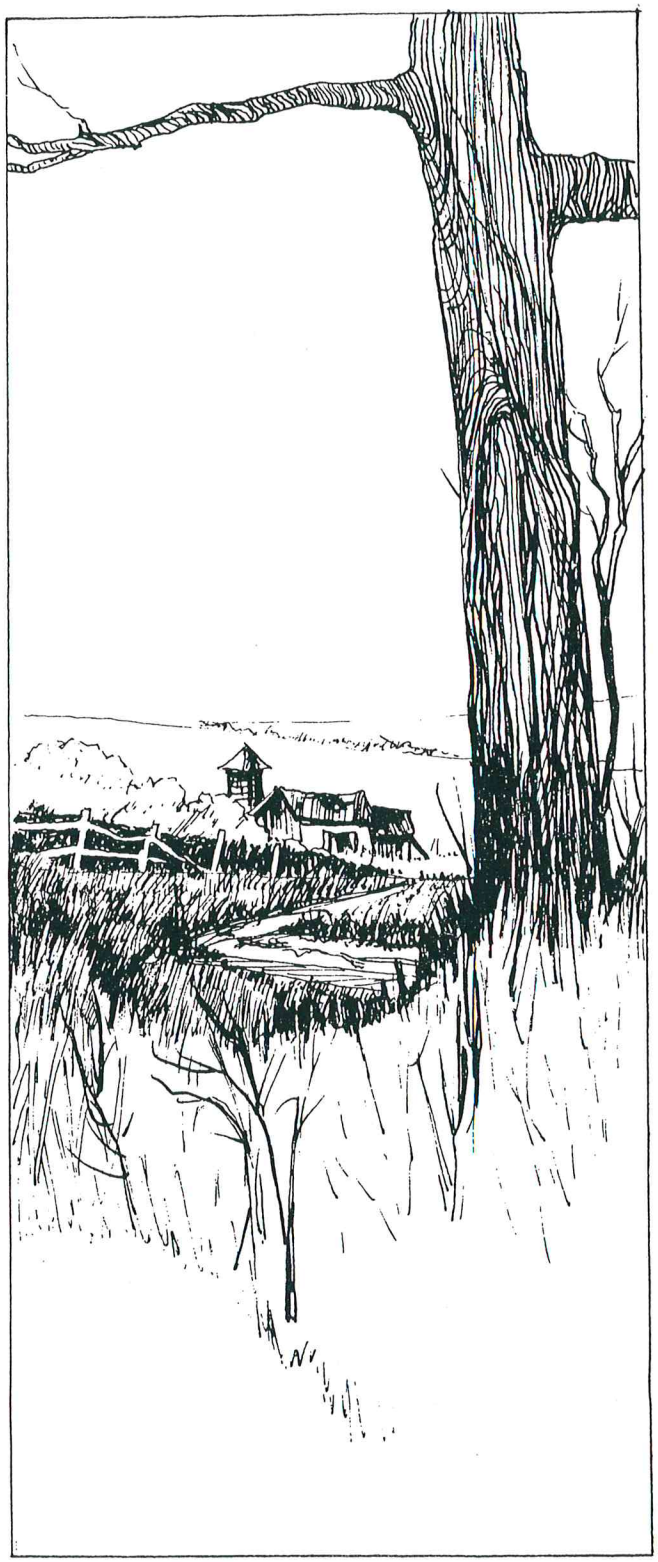
Africa

Most of Africa suffers from food shortages. Seventy percent of the people on the continent remain rural-based, yet again and again agriculture receives insufficient priority in development plans. Lack of fuel and inadequate transportation facilities hamper food distribution and storage. Africa has sufficient natural resources to feed itself and have a sizable surplus of basic foodstuffs for export. The fact is that since 1960, when Africa was virtually food self-sufficient, there has been a gradual decline in food self-sufficiency. Projections for the year 2000 indicate that Africa may only produce 65 percent of its own needs by then.[3] Problems in the Horn of Africa are presently further compounded by the steady influx of refugees and lack of food, fuel, housing, health care and educational facilities they need.

Asia

In Asia, where most of the world's people live, 80 percent of the population live and work in rural areas.

*Notes are on page 60



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During the 1940's and 1950's, when industrialization was considered development, the rural areas were neglected. This forced many from the rural areas to go to cities where they lived in slums and supplied cheap labor for new industries, most of which were foreign owned. In the 1960's, when the "Green Revolution" arrived with its dependence on expensive (and often imported) fertilizers and pesticides, rural development was supposedly undertaken. However, only those with enough capital could purchase the hybrid seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. Hence, the only thing that grew for the poor was the gap between them and the rich. Their chances of survival, much less development, diminished. Little by little, in the name of development and progress, large numbers of the poor have lost even their small farms.

One case in point is Dole Plantation in Kapalong, Davao del Norte, in the Phillipines. This area was formerly inhabited by the Ata and Mandaya tribes who were pushed deeper into the hills at the turn of the century by lowland settlers from other islands. The lowlanders often got land cheaply from the Atas or Mandayas who would owe them for tobacco or other commodities. Later, as abaca plantations were developed, more powerful people came along and did the same thing to these farmers. (Abaca is the plant from which the fiber for manila hemp is obtained.)

Finally, the transnational corporations (TNCs) arrived, in this case, Dole Banana Plantation. Hacienda owners in cooperation with Dole became growers. Together, they gradually acquired not only the abaca land but also all the land which was formerly allowed to the tenant farmers for their homes and small vegetable gardens where tenants grew their own food. Homes and crops were destoyed to make room for bananas for export.

For three hectares (one hectare equals 2.47 acres) of corn, abaca and palay (rice), one farmer received 300 pesos (about U.S. $38.00). Others got even less. Some didn't get anything.[4] With no alternatives, farmers went to work on the plantations. They were told they would become permanent workers after a six month probation period. However, many were laid off just before the sixth month was completed. Wages were supposed to be 8 pesos a day excluding benefits (U.S. $1.00). Workers actually received 4.75 pesos for the first year, 5.25 pesos the second year and after five years only 7.00 pesos (less than U.S. $1.00). Working conditions are equally unjust and health is adversely affected by allergic and other reactions to chemicals used in spraying, washing, and packing fruit.

The farmers say "We are like prisoners here. At night before we sleep and in the morning when we wake up, we see nothing but bananas. What future will our children have in such a situation?"[5]

Sugar cane planters are similarly exploited in Northeast Thailand. Since 1965, when one local sugar mill was purchased by the Shibato Company of Japan (a subsidiary of Mitsui), planters have been caught between this company and local companies who are trying to compete. More and more of the costs of fertilizers, soil improvement, road repair, and transportation have been passed along to the planters, often with arbitrarily determined interest rates.

One planter who became an organizer and leader of the group who protested these procedures was shot in his home. The shooting was not the first, nor will it end the conflict. Planters have been exploited for decades and will continue to be exploited on the basis of complex trading mechanisms.[6]

Latin America

In Latin America these stories are duplicated many times over. In Guatemala, for example, according to data collected in 1979,

> *81 percent of the children under five suffer from malnutrition; there is one teacher per 400 school-age children, and one policeman or soldier per 140 citizens; 65 percent of Guatemalans over 7 years of age are illiterate. Eight to ten bodies are found daily along the roadsides bearing signs of cruel torture. The minimum wage is $1.12 per day in rural areas; in industry, $2.00. Seventy percent of the population has an annual per capita income of $75 or less. The majority of the Guatemalan people are Indian farmers, whose lands have been reduced to tiny plots. Extreme poverty forces them to migrate to work the harvest on the coffee plantations of the highlands and Pacific slopes, and the sugar and cotton plantations of the coastal area, providing large landowners with cheap labor.*[7]

Conditions have worsened considerably in Guatemala since 1979. Systematic massacres have taken place in mountain villages such as San Miguel Acatan, Huehuetenango.

Military Rule

With tensions over land use and ownership increasing in the Third World, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of countries under direct/indirect military or authoritarian rule. In Southeast Asia almost every country has been taken over by martial law, or other form of authoritarian rule since the 1965 coup in Indonesia. (Japan and Hong Kong, for obvious economic reasons, are the exceptions.) The takeovers of these governments varied in style and name but the outcome was the same. Power is concentrated in the hands of civilian and/or military elites and those in their favor. Existing legal structures are dismantled or controlled. Media coverage is suppressed. People are systematically and forcefully denied basic civil and human rights. The local economy is re-structured to allow large TNCs to come in at bargain rates. Conditions favorable to them include large and extended tax exemptions, various forms of extremely favorable credit arrangements,

land preparation, building construction and, last but not least, a large and docile work force. Measures that soon follow are wage controls, and/or destruction of existing unions, usually replaced by government or company unions designed to control the workers. The right to strike is denied, and the poor working conditions that already existed decline further. Government forces are used to control people and do so by tactics of force and fear with training and arms supplied by their stronger allies.

Who Benefits?

Benefits from such a system go to the local elites, the TNCs, and the supporting governments—whether they are of the capitalist or communist variety. The people, who are denied all access to participation in decision-making, pay the price. A great share of the burden in all cases is borne by women and children who are the poorest of the poor.

The Churches

The churches all too often try to remain neutral in the face of such grave injustices. The majority of the hierarchy, clergy, laity and religious often stands with the ruling class. In many countries there are smaller groups (one-third or less) among the hierarchy who stand with the people and offer support in various ways. Naturally, this division weakens the position of the religious community. The people for the most part are left to the mercy of oppressive systems. Some governments, notably the Philippines, have studied the churches and then recommended and supported actions carefully and deliberately designed to capitalize on the divisions and weaknesses of the churches and thereby neutralize their effectiveness.

Development of Underdevelopment

Many people ask, "why can't Third World peoples feed themselves?" As suggested in the examples above, land control has been a critical factor. For many peoples now classified as "Third World," dependency is a relatively new phenomenon. Their histories go back thousands of years and often include the development of great civilizations. In the past they were able to feed themselves or they would not have survived. The question, then, is how did self-sufficient peoples become dependent peoples?

In many places in the pre-colonial period life was simple but the majority had enough to eat and there was some quality to their life. Most people lived on small farms and produced their own basic needs. Surpluses were exchanged in barter or cash systems through which other desirable or necessary goods were obtained. It was not a utopian existence. There were wars, pestilence, and natural disasters to contend with, yet, in general, harmony was maintained among people, land and environment through traditional methods of farming, grazing, and life style.

The colonial period drastically altered these structures and life styles. The needs of the mother country and the colonizer took precedence over the needs of local people. The introduction of monoculture farming and the plantation system gradually forced people off their land and left them without even enough arable land to produce adequate food for their own needs. Cash systems were introduced where there were no jobs for people to earn cash to purchase basic needs. Meanwhile, the colonial masters enriched themselves by exporting food and minerals to the mother country and its trading partners. This system has resulted in depletion of soil, destruction of mineral and other resources, poverty, destitution and dependence of local peoples.

Puerto Rico, for example, at the time of the Spanish-American War was producing all the food it needed in addition to exporting high quality coffee for the European market: "Coffee, unlike sugar, can be interspersed among food crops in the same land. Such a pattern of small-farm mixed cropping...made Puerto Ricans the best fed people of Latin America."[8]

After the U.S. took over in 1898, monoculture was introduced by large sugar companies which "by 1930 controlled 44 percent of all cultivated land. Sugar was rapidly crowding out food and large estates — generally foreign owned — were supplanting local family farms. People called sugar the 'hunger crop' as diseases related to hunger became common on the island."[9] The impact of such a system on peoples' lives is devastating. Besides losing their land, the source of their food, they also lose their independence and self-respect.

> *In the 1940's and 1950's Trans-National Corporations (TNCs) established tax-exempt, export-oriented factories on the island. But the capital-intensive industries brought little employment. The result, one-third of the Puerto Rican population has emigrated in desperate search of a livelihood. This growing number of job-seekers has been just what corporations both in Puerto Rico and on the U.S. mainland have needed to keep wages low and profits high. By 1974, U.S. corporation were extracting one-third of all their Latin American profits from Puerto Rico. Meanwhile 70-80% of the population is eligible for food stamps compared to less than 6% in the 50 states.*[10]

With slight variations on the theme, depending on history, climate, crops and local resources, a similar scenario could be developed for many of the so-called "developing" nations of the Third World. The impact on the lives of the people in country after country is disgraceful and sinful. Human lives and human values have been sacrificed time and again for the

sake of profits and power for elites in both "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries.

The end of the colonial period in political terms changed nothing but the externals. Economic colonialism has continued and expanded in the post-World War II period. Hidden by the facade of political independence, the economic exploitation of people, land and resources has escalated to a frightening degree. Lives, land, resources, ecology and environment have been seriously endangered.

Much of this degradation has been implicitly sanctioned by the U.S. and other Western powers who employ anti-communist rhetoric to justify the abuses. Massacres and atrocities of all sorts have been condoned by governments, military people of most western countries on this account. For fear of communism we have reaped a harvest of dehumanization which equals and often exceeds that of communism or any other ideology. Perhaps forty years ago rulers, business and military people could be forgiven for their excessive fears and zeal. But today, the victims of these forty years cry out to us for justice. Neither the extremes of capitalism nor those of communism have brought about justice and peace for all.

Role of the U.S. in the Third World

The U.S. plays a leading role in the world economy, and foreign business and government interests acknowledge and support such a role. According to Allan Nairn,

> *Guatemalan rightists, for example, look to Ronald Reagan as their last chance to cling to power.* Amigos del Pais, *a rightwing group of industrialists and agribusiness people, has been lobbying the U.S. Congress.* Amigos *has an annual budget of nearly half a million dollars to influence public opinion. And among the many Reagan aides to visit Guatemala was Richard Allen (former national security advisor to President Reagan) who was there only a few weeks before the election. "The Reagan aides' visits and supportive comments in 1980 were the talk of officials in Guatemala for days after their visit. Within weeks, death squad assassinations increased dramatically, and there was talk in government circles of 'harsher measures".*
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> *Throughout all these meetings, the same understanding emerged: the Guatemalan rightists and the Reagan advisors shared the same basic views. No negotiating was necessary. The pact has four main elements.*
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> *First, the Guatemalan government is to come off the list of those to whom military aid is prohibited...Second, a commitment has been made to resume Pentagon training of the army and police in surveillance, intelligence, and interrogation techniques. Third is the promise that Reagan will cut back U.S. criticism of the death squads which has so tarnished the political and financial standing of the Guatemalan government...Finally, there (was) the expectation that Reagan would intervene militarily in the event that a popular uprising threatened the government. In anticipation of such support, businessmen gave their all for the Reagan campaign.*[11]

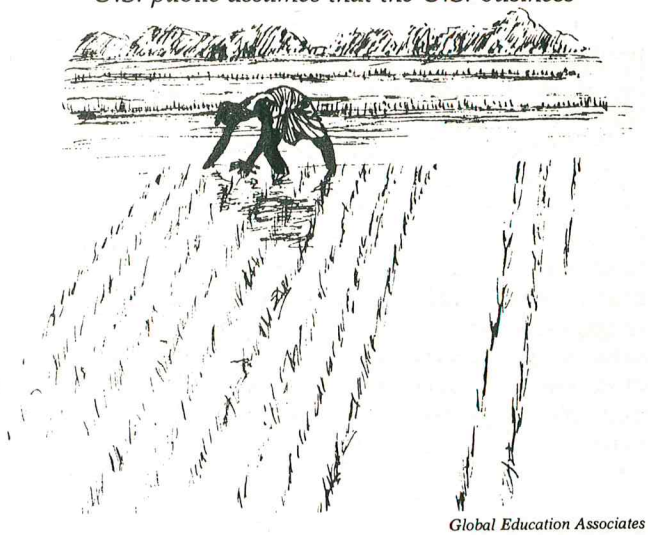
This all took place before Mr. Reagan actually became U.S. President. If we look at Guatemala today, we find an ever increasing reign of terror. Indians in remote villages are being systematically massacred. Most Guatemalan priests who live and work among the Indians are on the death list. Several Guatemalan priests and one from the United States (Stanley Rother of Oklahoma) have been murdered by government forces. American helicopters fly the troops into these remote areas where the Indians pitifully try to defend themselves with knives, sticks, and stones against the latest U.S. weaponry. *The fundamental issue over which these deaths are perpetrated is not ideology, but control of the land and its resources.*

The same story with some differences in details or methods has been unfolding in El Salvador, where in 1980, 10,000 were killed, and from January to June of 1981 more than 9,000 were killed, according to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

The death tolls may be fewer, but in the Philippines, Chile, Korea and other places where U.S. military or business interests are ensconced, there is also government suppression emanating from the struggle over land and resources.

David Abalos, Chairman of the Department of Sociology of Seton Hall University, notes that,

> *...for the most part, the American public is very ignorant of Latin America in general, and especially is in the dark when matters of U.S. foreign policy are involved. The U.S. public assumes that the U.S. business*



Global Education Associates

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and government involvement are for the welfare of the people in Latin America. They assume that the U.S. goal is to keep our Latin neighbors in the free enterprise system.[12]

In reality, free enterprise often means freedom for U.S. business to control all the conditions necessary to ensure its profits—production, marketing, advertising on the one hand and, on the other hand, repressive social, political and military restraints. Most of the risks are taken by the poor, a few by local collaborators, and sometimes very few by big business.

Mr. Abalos' statement on Latin America can be repeated for Asia and Africa. U.S. military and financial support supplies the backing for repressive governments around the globe. All of this is done under the rationale of anti-communism and national security. Hence, U.S. public support is unquestioningly and uncritically given.

The Philippines is an excellent example of how all this works. President Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972 in order to contain the communist New People's Army which he claimed was a threat to national security and to restore "law and order." It is known that the U.S. Ambassador was in the presidential palace in Manila the night before martial law was declared and since 1972 the U.S. has quadrupled its military aid to the Philippines. A strong nationalist movement which gained momentum in the 1960's and promoted a movement for economic independence from the U.S. was quelled. All laws designed to protect Filipino resources for the use of Filipinos were repealed or revised and the corporate world was given free reign. The Constitution of the land was re-written in 1973 to suit the wishes of the Marcos', their friends, and U.S. government and business. International funds were made readily available to support the new government.

The Chico River Basin Development Project in the Mountain Provinces of Northern Luzon in the Philippines is one example of how World Bank funds are used to support such governments. The U.S. controls 23 percent of the vote in the World Bank. A series of four dams was designed to be built along the Chico River, providing electricity to lowland provinces for industrial purposes at a cost of $2.4 billion (before inflation) and generating 1,010 megawatts of electricity—equivalent to two nuclear plants. The negative consequence was that 16 *ilis* (villages) would be submerged, displacing 15,000 families or 100,000 citizens and destroying 2,000 stone-walled, irrigated rice terraces and 2,500 hectares of coffee and fruit trees which are the primary cash crop of the people. In addition, the people would be deprived of their hunting and fishing grounds, and their political, religious, and cultural life would be destroyed. The people of Bontoc and Kalinga Provinces would not reap any of the benefits of the dams.

The government made promises of new lands, homes, water and so on. But members of another tribal group in the area heard those same promises over twenty years ago. To this day, many of those people have not received anything from the government and remain squatters on their own lands.

The controversy has continued since the mid-70s. The military and the government have tried all sorts of persuasion with the people and their leaders, from bribes and seduction to violence and murder. On April 24, 1980, government troops again resorted to violence and murdered one of the opposition leaders, Macli-ing, in the hopes of de-fusing the opposition. Instead, such a furor was raised on local, national, and international levels that the government had to acknowledge that government troops were responsible.[13]

Masagana 99, a program of the "Green Revolution" in the Philippines, is another example. It is one of many programs funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID). A few years ago, AID evaluated some of its programs in developing nations and acknowledged that many were not all that successful. However, one they believed to be a success was the *"Masagana 99"* miracle rice program. *Masagana 99* did eventually allow the Philippines to become a rice exporter rather than a rice importer. If success is based on the increased balance of payments exchange, then the program would have to be called a success.

"Masagana" in Tagalog means fruitful, bountiful, or prosperous. Hence, the government slogan,*"Masagana 99* is good for you." The people, however, called the program *"Masamà na 99"* which means miracle rice is bad for you. Why this difference of opinion? Weren't the people at least happy, if not grateful to be growing more rice?

As far as the people were concerned, the problems resulting from the new rice outweighed any benefits it might have brought to the national balance of payments. The pesticides brought severe health problems, and poor farmers could not afford the necessary fertilizer. Still today, loans are offered to encourage farmers to use "Masagana 99;" when they can't make the payments, they lose their land.

In addition, despite the fact that more rice was grown, the fact that it was used for export created greater shortages and higher prices at the local market. The result is that today, with the exception of Kampuchea, the poor in the Philippines are the worst fed people in Asia. More than 80 percent of Philippine pre-school children are grossly malnourished and the infant mortality rate is 7.2 percent[14]. In a land of beauty and rich natural resources like the Philippines such conditions do not happen by chance or by choice of the people. They are a direct result of the

manipulation of social, political, and economic structures for the benefit of the few.

U.S. businesses have had another impact on land around the world through continued sales of pesticides and drugs in Third World countries. Many of these are banned or restricted in the United States. Some are restricted in the U.S. even though deaths have been caused by their use. Still, they are knowingly produced and exported to Third World countries by U.S. corporations. The U.S. Government turns a deaf ear and says it can only control activities or sales in the U.S. and cannot impose its regulations on other countries. Corporations take advantage of larger loopholes in existing regulations which have been provided by generous or perhaps beleaguered legislators as a result of very expensive and very effective lobbying campaigns. Meanwhile, local governments and people in importing countries lack the education and means to adequately provide their own safeguards.

The irony is that the largest portion of pesticides used on food crops in the Third World is used on food for export. The U.S., therefore, imports food containing pesticides which are not allowed to be used in the U.S. Through the interdependent global ecological system, the U.S. also reaps rewards in the form of acid rains and contaminated water. Once more, the majority, who have not participated in decision-making, are paying the cost. The elite few are reaping the profits.

U.S. military sales and assistance programs for 1979 were over $9 billion—well in excess of four times the total budget of AID. Despite explicit congressional prohibition, at least nine dictatorships, widely denounced for their violation of human rights, continued to receive assistance: pre-revolutionary Nicaragua, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh, South Korea, Zaire, Paraguay and Haiti.

U.S. aid is highly concentrated in only a small number of countries chosen more for their military and/or economic importance to the U.S. than for their poverty or genuine commitment to development. In fact, the U.S. practice has been to cut off aid when *genuine* agrarian reforms are underway, as for example, in Chile, Thailand (and post-revolution Nicaragua). The same can be said for World Bank loan recipients as well as other multilateral funding sources.[15]

Churches in the United States and in other countries have been involved in this process wittingly or otherwise. Whether through ignorance or complicity, missionaries overseas, as well as clergy, laity and religious in the U.S. have, in the past, complacently and uncritically played a part in oppression.

How Will We Choose?

The choice is ours. Are we going to support policies and actions by government, military and business communities which make people and human values subservient to profit and power? Or are we going to place people, their dignity and their rights, at the center and logically work to develop policies which will enhance the value of human life? The future of our children and the legacy we leave to future generations will be shaped by our decisions.

We live in critical and exciting times. Our world is on the verge of giving birth to a new era in the history of creation. As citizens of the Global Community, it is urgent that we reflect critically on our reality. In an increasingly interdependent world community, we need to study the data and analyze the causes and the impact in terms of the quality of peoples' lives. Although we live in a world of limitations, we have a responsibility toward present and future generations to provide a world not built on an economy of war, fear and distrust but on one of justice and peace where all peoples have enough food and the opportunity to live decent lives worthy of human beings created in the image of God. □