Global Agriculture: Feeding the World

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Part 1

Global Harvest Initiative is five different companies right now, most of them agribusinesses, or associated with agribusiness. And it's John Deere, Monsanto, DuPont, IBM, and Elanco. And we've come together to look at some of the challenges of feeding the growing population between now and 2050. And we believe that to do that, agricultural productivity needs to increase. And so we look at different policies that really promote or foster development and agricultural productivity growth.

Most of these businesses have a long tradition in agriculture and really understand what it takes. And so they just really want to be kind of the think tank of the private sector to say, here's our point of view on policies that are successful in promoting development. And agriculture development has shown that that's what brings people out of poverty in these developing countries, because of a lot of the people that are malnourished or in poverty are also farmers. They farm a small plot of land. And developing and giving them tools and showing them a sustainable way to farm helps them help themselves.

Things are better when they're in a competitive situation. And I think in the end, that competition will make things better. Things will work out such that wherever the comparative advantage is, whether that's in America or whether that's in Europe or somewhere else, that competition, I think, is good. It makes both countries better.

There's just going to be a lot of change, a lot more people moving to middle class. And so I think there's plenty of demand that could be met by everybody. I really do believe that it's going to be everybody's productivity needs to increase to meet these demands. Today we have 7 billion people, and by 2050, we're going to have over 9 billion people. That's 2 more billion people that are going to have different needs than what people born today have. And so they're going to have a bigger impact on everybody's lives.

I do think it is possible to feed the growing population and also keep it affordable. We've seen that when you invest in research and when you invest in and adopt science-based technologies and invest in infrastructure and have trade rules that allow food to move, that those policies work. And we've looked at case studies and examples of different countries where their productivity shot up when they do the investment.

However, as soon as investment stops in any of those, then instead of that gradual increase that you need, then you just kind of see it tapered off. So the more that

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people understand that and what drives productivity, and the more that policies continue to reflect that, then I think we can make it. Maybe the easier part is producing the food. The access to food is another issue that still needs to be addressed, because even in America, I think there's 14% of people that are considered food insecure, don't have daily access to food when we export a lot of agriculture commodities and food. And so there's still an access issue all around the world that needs to be addressed at the same time if truly everybody's going to be fed by 2050.

Worldwide, our problem is not the food supply. We have enough food to feed everyone. Our problem is in distributing it. Do we just give everybody, North Korea and all the countries in Africa that are suffering drought, do we just give them the food? Well, 100 years ago, we decided no, we'll go teach them how to farm and ranch. And that has not worked.

And so we still find ourselves trying to ship the food. And then it becomes a matter of, are you really helping people by continuing to send them food? But I think we still sort of cling to the idea that's trying to be promoted by the United Nations, that if we can teach them how to fish rather than giving them a fish, we'll ultimately help them and the next generation. So somewhere in between is that balance of getting the food supply distributed to the right people.

I think in the future, primarily because we have to feed 9 billion people by the year 2050, there are going to be a whole bunch of people who were critical in 2012 of the way we do it. In 2050, people won't care how we did it. And so we are going to have to be very, very careful about what we do, because the overwhelming need to prevent malnutrition, the overwhelming need to just have something for people to eat could very easily lead us and many other countries to the point that we say, well, let's just produce it. To heck with whatever the outcome might be. Can I produce this food by using these technologies without, in fact, endangering public health? And so I think it's going to be a great challenge for us to do that. But feeding 9 billion people is just almost an unbelievable task.