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Ten Questions with Kenneth Quinn, President of The World Food Prize

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# Ten Questions with Kenneth Quinn, President of The World Food Prize



Food Tank, in partnership with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, is hosting the [1st Annual Chicago Food Tank Summit](#)



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<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/chicago-we-can-change-the-food-system-the-2016-food-tank-summit-tickets-20817007229>) on November 16, 2016.

This event will feature more than 40 different speakers from the food and agriculture field. Researchers, farmers, chefs, policymakers, government officials, and students will come together for interactive panels, networking, and delicious food, followed by a day of hands-on activities and opportunities for attendees.

Food Tank recently had the opportunity to speak with Kenneth Quinn, President of [The World Food Prize](https://www.worldfoodprize.org/) (<https://www.worldfoodprize.org/>), who will be speaking at the summit.

### **Food Tank (FT): What inspired you to get involved in food and agriculture?**

Kenneth Quinn (KQ): As a city kid from the Bronx, I had no interest in agriculture or food production. However, my assignment as a 26 year old rural development advisor in 1967 during the war in Indochina exposed me to the endemic poverty experienced in remote villages, as well as the incredible transformative power of the new IR 8 “miracle rice” variety. When combined with improved rural roads, these new seeds could triple the harvest for poor subsistence farmers and lift them out of poverty. At the same time, the combination of “roads and rice” undercut the allure of underground terrorist organizations. Working in villages as the Green Revolution was born, changed the course of my professional career forever. I came to see issues of hunger, agriculture and food security as central to foreign policy. A decade later as US ambassador in Cambodia, I used this same formula to completely eradicate the Khmer Rouge, the worst, genocidal mass-murdering, terrorist organization of the second half of the 20th century. These experiences led to my position as President of the World Food Prize, after I retired from the State Department in 1999.

### **FT: What do you see as the biggest opportunity to fix the food system?**

KQ: The biggest opportunity to fix the international food system is to upgrade and extend rural road systems, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Improved farm to market roads will permit enhanced agricultural technology to be available to the poorest farmers, most of whom are women, allowing them to sustainably produce more nutritious and plentiful food, while successfully dealing with the critical challenges of climate volatility, water scarcity, political instability and military conflict. As Norman Borlaug said: “If you want to feed Africa,



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build roads!”

**FT: What innovations in agriculture and the food system are you most excited about?**

KQ: I am most excited by the promise of biotechnology to develop seeds that will allow the poorest one billion plus smallholder, subsistence farmers, the great majority of whom are women, to maintain agricultural production and even have increased yields in the face of the growing threats of droughts, floods and salt water intrusion from rising seas, caused by global warming and climate change.

**FT: Can you share a story about a food hero that inspired you?**

KQ: The food hero who still most inspires me is the late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, the Father of the Green Revolution, which became the single greatest period of food production and hunger reduction in all human history. Dr. Borlaug is universally admired for his humility and lifelong commitment to helping alleviate human suffering due to hunger and malnutrition, and uplifting the poorest people. He is one of the very few persons in our country who is still able to draw admiration and respect from leaders of both American political parties, who are so deeply divided on almost every other issue. Especially relevant in terms of his inspiration for this conference was Norm’s dream as a young boy to play second base for the Chicago Cubs.

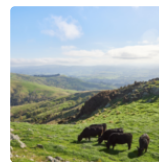
**FT: What drives you every day to fight for the bettering of our food system?**

KQ: What drives me everyday to improve the food system is that at various times during my career, I came personally face to face with starving people and suffering refugees as well as interacting with populations that had been irretrievably stunted by malnutrition. In every instance, the preponderance of those suffering were women and children. In addition to the memory of those unfortunate people, I am motivated by the fact that we now face the greatest challenge in all human history: can we eradicate hunger and sustainably and nutritiously feed our burgeoning world population. Finally, I believe agriculture can be a critical means to promoting peace and increased understanding between sharply divided countries and populations, such as between Israel and its Muslim neighbors, and Iran and the United States.

**FT: What’s the biggest problem within the food system our parents and grandparents didn’t have to deal with?**

KQ: Our parents and grandparents did not have to confront the specter of widespread obesity. It was my awareness of this growing international scourge that led to my holding a symposium in 2005 on “The Dual Global Challenges of Obesity and Malnutrition.” Most recently, in 2016, our Borlaug Dialogue focused on the nexus of diet and

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health with the theme “Let Food Be Thy Medicine,” a maxim first offered 2,400 years ago by Hippocrates. Our 2016 World Food Prize laureates were four scientists (two Africans and two women) who were honored for conventionally breeding critical vitamins and minerals into staple crops, such as orange-fleshed sweet potatoes.

**FT: What’s the first, most pressing issue you’d like to see solved within the food system?**

KQ: The two most pressing issues to be solved in the food system are: first, how to eliminate food waste that keeps one third of all crops and processed food from reaching markets or being consumed. Included would be improving the logistical storage, transport and food delivery and distribution systems, to ensure adequate nutritious food is available to all on our planet; and second, how to address critical gender issues to ensure that girls are given equal educational and career opportunities. Those countries that make full use of all of their human capacity, are the ones that will be most successful in uplifting their populations out of hunger and poverty and ensuring food security.

**FT: What is one small change every person can make in their daily lives to make a big difference?**

KQ: One small change everyone can make is to, using appropriate steps in their culture, urge political leaders to confront hunger at home and abroad. As President John F. Kennedy said in 1963, we have the means to end world hunger, what we lack is the political will.

**FT: What’s one issue within the food system you’d like to see completely solved for the next generation?**

KQ: The one food issue I wish to see completely solved for the next generation is eradicating childhood hunger and malnutrition, especially during the critical first 1,000 days, and then throughout school years.

**FT: What agricultural issue would you like for the next president of the United States to immediately address?**

KQ: The agricultural issue I wish the next president to immediately address is to announce that the highest priority of the US agricultural research, assistance and production systems is to uplift out of poverty and food insecurity, the 900 million poorest people in the world, the majority of them women and children, as well as the additional two billion people who will be on our planet in the next 30 years

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*To find out more about the event, see the full list of speakers, and purchase tickets, please click [HERE](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2016-food-tank-summit-chicago-il-tickets-20817007229) (https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2016-food-tank-summit-chicago-il-tickets-20817007229). Interested*

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**Marisa Tsai** (<https://foodtank.com/news/author/marisa-tsai/>).

Marisa is a Masters candidate of the Food Policy and Applied Nutrition program at Tufts University. In addition to her academics and work with Food Tank, she is involved with the Long Beach Health Department's healthy retail program and nutrition education efforts. Marisa is passionate about food justice, nutrition, and sustainable food policy. Find her on social media: @marzipantsai

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