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COMMENTARY - WHAT WOULD NORM SAY?



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*Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn
President, The World Food Prize Foundation*

Given the decade-long relationship I had with him in building the World Food Prize, I am sometimes asked about what the late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dr. Norman E. Borlaug might say about a particular topic.

So, if Norm, as everyone knew him, were still here, you might wonder how he would react to the new report just issued by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, entitled *Advancing Global Food Security: The Power of Science, Trade and Business*.

Dr. Borlaug was a phlegmatic Norwegian from northeast Iowa and not given to wild outbursts of emotion, so I am not sure that he would have actually hugged the two co-chairs who directed the preparation of this report: World Food Prize laureate Catherine Bertini and former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman. But most certainly he would have told them how extremely pleased he was with the great emphasis that the report puts on the critical importance of science.

Norm was about the primacy of science in agriculture from his days growing up on the farm. His earliest ambition (aside from playing second base for the Chicago Cubs) was to be a high school science teacher. We all can be grateful that, during his time at the University of Minnesota, he became enthralled with the challenge of confronting rust disease that took him to a Ph.D. in plant pathology and then to Mexico and the start of the Green Revolution in India and Pakistan.

Dr. Borlaug, therefore, would have certainly embraced Recommendation 1 of the report about making global food security a high priority of U.S. policy. One of the very first things Norm ever shared with me was how dismayed he was at the downward trend in terms of funding for agricultural research. He believed that the U.S. leadership in global agriculture, in which he played such a significant role of over the past sixty years, could slip away if the funding and priority were not maintained by the president and the congress.

I believe Norm would have felt just as strongly about Recommendation 2, calling for a new science of agriculture based on "sustainable intensification," an approach also advocated by his great friend Sir Gordon Conway in a 2013 Montpellier Panel Report. Norm's partner in pioneering the Green

Revolution, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, the first World Food Prize laureate, has advocated that agricultural advances must take place in the context of “An Ever-Green Revolution.” Norm agreed completely

A third element in the report, which I feel certain Norman Borlaug would agree with deals with the dramatic variations of weather now occurring. Climate volatility is one more area where science and - Norm would emphasize this in bold letters - biotechnology has a special role to play. If we are to be able to increase the amount of food produced on the land now in cultivation and to accomplish this in the face of new challenges of drought, flooding, and salt water intrusion (to mention but a few), then he would argue all aspects of science, including biotechnology, must be available.

In 2006 at the World Food Prize Borlaug Dialogue symposium in Des Moines, Norm sat on the stage with Sir Gordon, Dr. Rajiv Shah (then the leader of the Gates Foundation Global Agriculture project), Catherine Bertini, and Dr. Chen Zhangliang to review just what the priorities should be for global agricultural strategy. Many of the ideas they discussed that day can now be seen coming to fruition in terms of the U.S. Feed the Future initiative, the Gates Foundation Global Strategy, and now this Chicago Council Report.

So as we approach our year-long Centennial Observance of Dr. Norman’s Borlaug’s birth this coming October, it would be good to remember his very last words, “Take it to the farmer.” The ‘it’ that Norm was talking about was the science of agriculture and all of the ways in which it can enhance the lives of all of those poorest and most food insecure citizens of our planet.

So what would Norm say? I think he would first say “Thank you” to Catherine Bertini, Dan Glickman, Marshall Bouton, and Lisa Eakman and all of the members of their Chicago Council team who produced this exceptional report.

I think Norm would say “Take this science to those farmers in Africa and around the globe, particularly the smallholder farmers, whose fate and well-being will hang in the balance in decades ahead.”

*Full Disclosure: It was my privilege to serve as a member of the advisory group that help develop this remarkable overview of the challenges facing the international community in the 21st century, as well as shape its targeted recommendations in regard to U.S. policy on global agriculture.

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