

Darrell G. Moen, Ph.D.

Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

The Business of Hunger

Maryknoll World Productions (1984: 28 minutes)

Narrator: Ruby Dee

Transcribed by Darrell Gene Moen

Man in scene from "Grapes of Wrath": I'm right here to tell you mister there ain't nobody goin' push me off my land. My grandpa took up this land 70 years ago. My pa was born here. We was all born on it. And some of us was killed on it. And some of us died on it. That's what makes it our's, being born on it and working on it and, and dying, dying on it! And not no piece of paper with writing on it!

Filipino farmer: My land was planted before in corn, coconuts, and rice, but two days ago with no warning these bulldozers showed up. It seems the government owns the land. We have no paper to prove it is mine, so now we have nothing! We have no more source of livelihood. Now a big company will plant pineapples on my land.

Narrator: What company are you referring to?

Filipino farmer: Dole. I'm really going crazy because there is no food for my children.

Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez: When God created the world, he gave people land to till. And through the land, people had to survive here on earth and live life that is proper of a human being, that is, living a life of dignity. However, if these multinational corporations use the land for pineapples, then we deprive our people of much needed land. So many thousands of families are going hungry because of the unavailability of land.

Narrator: Multinational corporations now grow more food in Asia, Africa, and Latin America than ever before. But much of the food is exported while over 500 million people go hungry. Many people believe that hunger is caused by drought, war, or overpopulation. But in the vast Sahel region in West Africa, there is another reason: peanuts!

A hundred years ago, French colonialists who controlled most of the Sahel forced farmers there to grow peanuts for the French vegetable oil industry. Peanut farming and processing by multinational corporations expanded rapidly after the Second World War. By the 1960s, peanuts were king of the Sahel. Over half the cultivated land of Senegal, 2.5 million acres (1 million hectares), is now devoted to growing peanuts for export to Europe.

Director of the United Nations Institute for Africa, Samir Amin ...

Samir Amin: Certainly, throughout the history of the development of peanuts in Senegal, for a long time, for a whole century, the European consumer and European capitalism has been benefitting from peanuts. Certainly, who suffered from the peanut, first and before anybody else, is the African peasant himself who was compelled to work more to produce, in addition to his own subsistence, some peanuts, which were paid at a very low price.

The low return on peanuts produced a huge migration to the cities in Africa, and the growing proportion of the population of those cities are really terrifically poor and are certainly not benefitting from the peanut industry.

Narrator: Peanuts also deplete the soil. Peanut harvesting uproots the plants since the nuts grow underground. The disrupted soil is gradually carried off by dry season winds. The small peanut farmers are too poor to replenish the soil with fertilizer, so they grow peanuts until the soil is exhausted and then they move on, leaving barren land behind.

Today, a terrible drought. The food storage bins in the villages are nearly empty. Malnutrition and famine are spreading.

Samir Amin: The famine is not due to the drought. The drought has only revealed the seriousness of the situation, has aggravated it, but the desertification of the country by over-cultivating peanuts throughout a whole century has been and is the main responsibility for the deficiency in food agriculture today.

Narrator: The vast estates in southern Brazil grow soybeans which are processed locally into oil by large American companies such as Cargill, and then exported to Europe and Japan.

Kenneth Mueller (President, Agribusiness Council): Food processing, extensive and intensive farming, are part of progress, and they are part of a slow, step-by-step, measured, progression of agribusiness improvement. This is what every country wants. This is what we are trying to bring to them.

Narrator: The first large-scale soybean farming began in the state of Parana.

Claus Magno Germer (Brazil, Parana Secretary of Agriculture): In this region, we've had a flood of agricultural technology. The result of this were very serious social and ecological consequences. From the social point of view, intensive mechanization developed here in the area of soybeans resulted in the expulsion of small farmers.

Narrator: The displaced farmers used to grow staple crops here for local consumption, such as the common black bean. The land is now used for soy, so black beans have become scarce and prices have gone up. A pound of black beans costs the average Brazilian one-day's pay. A gallon of milk, two-day's pay. In Brazil, two out of every three people don't get enough to eat.

Ladislau Dowbur (Brazil, economist): If you take soy, for example, it's taking up, presently, roughly 25% of the area of basic plantations in the country. And this is enormous. Soy, which Brazil is exporting as oil, is obviously taking land from food crops. And this type of orientation of agriculture makes people hungrier.

bThe expansion of food exports from Third World countries ironically grew out of an international effort to feed the people in those countries.

Ernest Feder (Mexico, economist): The story starts with the Green Revolution some 20 years ago when the United States government and several foundations, so-called philanthropic foundations, transferred a lot of technology in terms of new seeds, fertilizer, and chemicals to the underdeveloped world, and developed wheat and rice cultivation on a very large scale.

Agribusiness promotional film narration: The new varieties of wheat and rice allow the increasing demands of a growing population to be satisfied.... The tools are there, and the battle against hunger can be won. Men of dedication and strong will, will see to it. Because they must see to it.

Narrator: Agribusiness companies quickly joined the Green Revolution to help feed the world. But critics such as Ernest Feder argue that the profit motive got in the way.

Ernest Feder: The capitalists who invested in Third World grain production rapidly expanded into other fields. This included a whole variety of other products such as fruits and vegetables, livestock. Wheat and rice don't earn the returns that high-value crops secure. Therefore, it is obvious that the transnational corporations push the type of crops which are the most remunerative for them. And they are obviously the export crops.

Kenneth Mueller: Agribusiness must make a profit. In fact, the term "agribusiness" means profit. Business means profit.

Narrator: For the past 20 years, Gulf and Western, a U.S. multinational corporation, has grown, processed, and exported sugar from the Dominican Republic. They ended up controlling 85% of the economy of the eastern part of that country.

Deputy Velazques Mainardi: In Eastern Dominican Republic, where Gulf is based, there should be prosperity. But nevertheless, the statistics show that it's one of the areas with the highest level of malnutrition, where there are the largest number of children who die at an early age, and where the people don't have the minimum resources to sustain themselves in a dignified and decent manner.

Narrator: How long since you've eaten?

Woman with child on the street: About a week. I get food in the streets or leftovers from restaurants or people give me a peso or half a peso. I am not working and the government doesn't give me anything for my child. It doesn't help anyone. Not even to cover the basic needs.

Deputy Velazques Mainardi: Gulf and Western is not the problem. The problem is the Dominican government. Our government, far from preserving our national interests by regulating investments, has opened its arms so that Gulf and Western plunders our country.

Rafael Taveras (oppositon political leader): If the government fails to satisfy the growing demands of the people, the Dominicans will carry the struggle to a level that won't merely be equal to that in Central America, it will be even greater.

Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat, Vermont): You know, the United States has allowed too often some of its largest multinationals to control not only the economy, but the politics, the social structure, the military, everything, land policy, of some of these Third World countries. That's one of the reasons we're in the problem we're in in Central America, some of the reasons we've had problems around the world.

Narrator: In the Philippines, the army patrols the countryside to crush rebellious farmers. It is a rebellion caused in part by the bitterness of farmers who have lost their land to multinational corporations. Del Monte, a U.S. agribusiness, is expanding its pineapple production under land once cultivated by small farmers like this man.

Filipino farmer: Why should I not be angry? Especially for me, who was helping my mother here when Del Monte took away our land. Just because they are rich and they are enjoying their wealth, they still take our land away from us. Anyone would be outraged if their land was taken away like this.

Narrator: The Philippine government makes money by acquiring peasant farmland and leasing it to foreign agribusiness. When peasants resist, the government resorts to extreme measures.

Filipino landless laborer: I sold my land because they asked me to. And I really had no choice. If I didn't sell it, they would keep on coming back to me until I finally gave in and sold out to the company. Now, if a farmer won't sell, they get armed men to try to frighten him off. The farmers left because of fear. Because if they would not sell the land, their lives would be taken.

Kenneth Mueller: When any kind of intensive agriculture program is undertaken, there will be some displacement and some movement of people. But the trade-offs, it would seem in every place that they have occurred, that we're familiar with, are to the side of plus.

Narrator: The movement of hundreds of millions of peasant families from their farms to the enormous urban centers of the Third World is the largest mass migration of people in all history.

Filipino shantytown dweller (ex-farmer): My crops were coffee, coconuts, and cacao. Now that the company has taken over my land, I am not able to continue planting because the company is going to use it. Since there is really nothing more I can do there, I came here to live in the city. I have no job. My children are really hungry. My only wish is that they can eat at least one meal a day.

Narrator: Three out of four Philippine children under age five are malnourished. Yet over half the food grown in the Philippines is exported.

Archbishop Helder Camera (Brazil): God created the land for all. We read in the Bible, when a man is working the land [he is happy]. To put this man [without warning] in the cities, it is a great sin against God and against human creatures.

Narrator: Millions of peasants whose land has been taken over by agribusiness end up in a desperate struggle against hunger. Children are often the first victims of a society where a higher priority is placed on exporting food than on feeding local people first.

Dr. Evon Torres (pediatrician, Brazil): This child's condition is critical. He has third-degree malnutrition. It represents a degree that is very critical.

Narrator: The child died a few days later.

Claus Magno Germer: I have the firm conviction that if we don't modify the economy policy of our country in a way to improve things, to give more attention to the internal

necessities of the people here, then we will bring our country to an even bigger internal crisis.

Ladislau Dowbur: What the American population needs is to understand that the gravity of the problems, take two-thirds of the population going hungry, is so great that transformations must be started, and the support of the American public for these transformations is extremely important.

Sen. Patrick Leahy: At some point, we're going to have to realize that our foreign policy has to be based on a sense of social justice, but our allies are going to have to face that too.

Ernest Feder: I think the best thing that the United States could do is to withdraw from the Third World agriculture and leave these countries to their own resources.

Narrator: The abandoned wreckage of an American agribusiness called Bud Antle, which expanded into Senegal in 1972. Advanced irrigation technology was used to grow green beans for export to Europe. In 1976, when the operation was no longer profitable, they abandoned their estate and left Senegal to figure out what to do about it.

Ernest Feder: It is possible, that in the beginning, this would present for the Third World grave problems. But on the other side, it would be an extremely important challenge to organize their production, their processing, for themselves.

Narrator: In the past few years, local farmers have taken over what had been the Bud Antle estate. They have formed a cooperative for growing and selling their crops. Some of what they grow is for their own consumption, some is for local markets.

Ladislau Dowbur: You cannot continue to promote development that has foreign roots. You have to base development on local forces. What I think is that you have to turn things over. Start from local necessities, like the developed countries have. Respond to the local necessities and then organize your exports, organize your foreign relations according to the logic of your surplus and not to the logic of what is being needed in northern countries.

Narrator: These farm laborers in northwest Mexico don't work for a foreign agribusiness. They own the land they work on. Five thousand landless peasants fought for and took over 50,000 acres of idle farmland here. Peasant leaders recognized that they could not go back to each family farming their own small plot of land. They saw that modern farm technology makes for efficient food production. So they work their land as one large cooperative farm, each member owning a share of the business. They

have started a small industry for building their own houses. They have their own schools and their own credit union.

Victor De La Fuente (Coalition founder): For the peasant family, our coalition represents economic and social freedom as opposed to their traditional oppression. Before, we were all day-laborers and we were unable to have many things we deserved for the jobs we did on the farms owned by others. Now, we have the land and we receive what we are owed, the fruits of our labor.

Ernest Feder: The sooner we let these Third World countries work out their own problems, the better it will be for these countries and even for the industrialized countries. If we don't, I think our system will be totally incapable, if it is not already totally incapable, to resolve the problems, the catastrophic problems of hunger and poverty.

Narrator: In Columbus, Ohio, people at a food cooperative are alerting their community to the problems of hunger in the Third World.

Robert Pickford (Director, Federation of Ohio Cooperatives): Our food cooperative imports products from the Third World. Products like dried pineapple, dried banana chips, and as we've learned more about food distribution in the world, we have learned that many of these products are brought into the United States from countries that experience significant malnutrition. We developed a strategy of taxing those items that we import from Third World countries and using the revenues from that tax to educate ourselves and people in our communities about food and hunger issues.

Narrator: Groups such as this Bread for the World chapter in Memphis, Tennessee are lobbying members of congress to change U.S. policy toward the developing world.

Bread for the World meeting participant: I'm a dietician. I have a very deep concern for malnutrition, and I'm afraid that what is happening in the more developed nations is that we're promoting malnutrition in these Third World countries.

Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez (Philippines): We are expecting the people in America to express also their faith to really help us by putting pressure on these multinational corporations. I think that is one way of expressing also our faith, putting pressure on these multinational corporations.

Narrator: We can make a difference in overcoming hunger in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We can demand that U.S. government and business policies in the Third World give priority to feeding local people first. We can support movements by peasants to own their own land and grow their own food. In these ways, our brothers

and sisters in the Third World will have enough to eat, and will have a future for themselves and their children.