
Report - Speech

Speech at Farmers World Network – India*

Michael Hart ^a

a. *Small and Family farms Alliance England, Email:- michael.sffa@btconnect.com*

* *This speech was delivered at the Farmers World Network in India, November 2001. The critical content of the talk and its relevance to the contemporary theme as well as the discourse of food production, the editorial board decided to re-publish this speech. Here, we would like to express our thanks to Ms. Sibylle Bahrmann for introducing Mr Michael Hart and his speech.*

Good afternoon!

I have drawn the short straw today the first slot after lunch when people tend to nod off. So I just hope what I have to say is interesting enough to keep you awake.

For those of you that don't know me I am a tenant farmer from Cornwall with 102 acres, I was a milk producer until 18 months ago and I now produce beef and sheep.

I am also chairman of the Small and Family Farms Alliance, which does its best to be the voice of the family farm.

I have also always had an interest in promoting a better understanding of agriculture among non-farmers. And as often happens one thing leads to another and so I have become involved in

----- I'm not quite sure what to call it---- but agricultural politics and policy probably fits it in a loose way.

This has led me into meeting and working with many different organisations, campaigns and individuals and led this year to the opportunity to go to India and to take part in a citizen's jury in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

For someone who has not travelled a great deal it was quite an experience and as you can imagine a culture shock. Including the taxi ride from Hyderabad to the rural village where the jury was to take place, as any of you who have been to India will know the roads are completely mad. And our taxi driver managed to knock a scooter rider off his scooter and under a bullock cart so with a near riot going on around the taxi.

I was very glad to be sharing the taxi with an Indian Supreme Court judge who was overseeing the jury process. My thinking being I have a witness here who will be believed that I had nothing to do with it, the judge then in the middle of this bedlam very calmly

Back to why I was in India and the citizen's jury. The jury was to consider the state's plan for agriculture drawn up by American consultants and called Vision 2020.

Part of that plan is to modernise and mechanise agriculture, it promotes the use of GM crops and intensive and monoculture farming systems including intensive dairy and poultry production. With much of this production being done on a contract-farming basis and with much of the produce exported.

To be considering following the route western agriculture has already taken, and with which many countries in the west now find themselves with major problems over, both for the farmers involved and for the environment, wildlife landscape and food safety and quality. I found to be rather naïve and disappointing.

To then discover that the UK government through DFID is supporting this Vision 2020 along with other aid agencies I found even more disturbing. This plan is likely to put as many as 20 million farmers off the land in the name of so called efficiency as farm size is increased and mechanisation takes place. What they are to do with 20 million ex farmers is not addressed at all other than in vague terms like employment in the service sector.

asked me to explain my thinking on the WTO while we waited for it to be sorted out. Luckily nobody was hurt and after the taxi driver had borrowed 250 rupees from me to pay for the repair of a rear light lens we continued our journey.

There is also mention of training, diversification and adding value to produce as part of the Vision 2020 plan.

Now anyone who is familiar with the UK government's plan for agriculture will have read much the same plan for farming in the UK. Increase farm size giving economies of scale and so called more efficient farms, produce competing on the world market due to the opening up of free trade in food and agriculture by the WTO removing barriers. Barriers that in many cases protect countries food production and therefore their food security.

In the UK plan we also mention training for farmers, diversification and adding value and just like in AP it means people will have to leave the land.

I also became aware that like here decisions were being made about how they should farm and their futures by people who had no grass roots contact with or understanding of agriculture

So I had much in common with my fellow farmers in AP before we even looked at the current situation and once again the reality of the situation was very similar. Low prices for produce often with the selling price below the cost of production, due to cheap imports and market place power in a very few hands at the far end of the food chain from the farmer.

Increasing debt among farmers, like here where the UK's farming industry has help to fund a cheap food policy by

borrowing money to the tune of about 8 billion pounds in total now and of course there were the usual farming problems of weather, pests and disease.

It is therefore not surprising to find the same results as here----- farmers committing suicide, depression, farmers leaving the land for an unknown future and a feeling of having no value in the eyes of the rest of today's society.

It is although the world over the vast majority who have left the land have become so remote from where food comes from that they fail to see the connections between what they buy in their local supermarket and farmers, the land and the environment. That failure to see the connection between what is now seen as just another commodity and the environment and farming is what has driven farming in the UK and caused many of the problems we have today.

That failure is now what is going to drive farming in AP into the very methods of production that we in the west all claim we don't want, intensive monocultures, factory farming of animals and methods which causes damage to, the environment, wildlife, the landscape and to rural people.

We now appear in the UK to be thinking that we must swing policy the other way, in which the environment, landscape etc becomes more important than food production, ----- look at the countryside agency's submission to the food and farming commission----- and food we can import because we are a rich nation.

That way we will have the best of both world's cheap food and a fine environment and wonderful landscape to look at.

We will of course ignore the environmental consequences of transporting that food around the globe. We will of course ignore the cost to the nation who we buy that food from in terms of cultural changes, environmental damage and food displacement from food for the local people to use to the export market and remember many of these countries already have malnutrition problems.

We will claim that the people on average will be better off, ignoring the fact that farmers don't export food only exporters and trans-national companies do that, benefiting the few not the many.

These countries will use all the methods we disapprove of including GM crops. But out of sight, and therefore out of the mind of western consumers and of course because we will be sending aid out through DFID and other sources that will make it "all right".

Not for the 20 million farmers displaced from the land in AP it won't, or for the 40,000 more on top of the 50,000 who have already left the land in the UK.

And it is not just the UK and India, on the way back to the UK and with a stopover of 7 hours in the middle of the night at Mumbai airport I got talking to an Australian farmer's daughter.

I must just say I am not in the habit of talking to attractive young women in coffee bars who are complete strangers but 7 hours is a long time to not talk to anyone.

She told the same tale of farming in her country. In Queensland family dairy farms are giving up farming in ever-larger numbers, why? Because the price

they are paid for milk is below the cost of production just like here in the UK. It is down so they are told because they have to compete on the world market for milk products, but we in the UK are told we have to compete with farmer's like these from Australia, so just who are they supposed to be unable to compete with?

The answer to the question is, of course its not other farmer's, it is the international traders who are so few and so powerful that they are able to set the market price to suit their profits.

The result----- big factory dairy farms instead of family farms.

Although the numbers of farmers leaving the land and the effects are far greater in Andhra Pradesh than facing farmers here, as a percentage of the number of farmers it is the same.

And there are other similarities that we find here.

The lack of dialogue with grassroots farmers and rural people by government, by environmentalists and other NGO's and in the case of India the aid agencies. I can to some extent understand government's reluctance to engage in debate with grassroots farmers. But the NGO's and aid agencies and their "we know best attitudes" and with many of them coming up with their vision for farming without ever consulting with farmers I find unbelievable.

This is my one piece of technology to day the result of the Jury ----- slide of our vision

As you can see they rejected Vision 2020 and what it involves I have here a

few copies of the full verdict if anyone should want one.

One of the final points made by the citizens' jury was that their verdict on their farming future should be "that foreign aid (from white people) should follow their vision and benefit the poorest". I have no doubt that DFID and the other aid agencies will claim that this is their aim too, but have they really consulted the people whom it will affect or is it a case of "we know best and our very expensive consultants agree with us"

Without a true dialogue with people their frustration and disillusionment with the existing political systems will lead to ever more radical uprisings.

Rather than sitting around waiting for the next uprising and then dealing with it, governments could have a real dialogue with farmers and consumers and that might just help them to get a handle on the complex issues of food and farming.

Unless this debate takes place, in the case of food and farming by bringing family farmers, rural people, environmentalists and consumers in to the debate rather than the current "we know best" attitude of governments and experts both of whom are driven by big business.

We are in for some major problems.

I found my experience in India an interesting and exciting one but also one, which left me deeply, disturbed with its vision for agriculture.

I believe that farming is unique to each and every country for many reasons.

To do what we are attempting to do now with a one system fits all for agriculture under the WTO will in the end lead to disaster for mankind. In terms of our future ability to deliver a

sustainable supply of good food for us all which does as little damage as possible to the planets environment.

India can on all the evidence I saw and heard feed itself without GM crops, without excessive use of pesticides and fertilisers and without massive changes to the culture of rural people. There are undoubtedly problems with food storage after harvest, with a lack of processing capability for crops to stop wastage and with distribution but none of them are unsolvable given the will to do so. The farmers in India undoubtedly have the skills and ability to feed India. What they don't need is aid agencies telling them we know best and placing our western material values on their lives as a measure of quality of life, or trans-national companies exploiting them, the soil and environment to make money by feeding us in the west.

I have also over the course of this year attended a number of meetings with farmers from around the world and it is clear **the farming crisis is world-wide** and for the same underlying reasons that we know of here and that I found in India.

I was in Geneva at the end of September with farmers and environmental, social and aid agency NGO's from around the world from both the North and the South, again the similar stories from around the world was very striking. I was also concerned at the NGO's lack of understanding of what I call the "real world" that farmers live in rather than the sometimes-idealistic world of some of the NGO's.

I have also become concerned at the solution put forward by many ----that access to markets in the north for

farmers from the south will solve all problems.

Many times this year I have heard the words if "farmer's in the south had access to land, credit technology and markets in the north it would solve their problems".

But when I say that as a farmer in the north I have access to land, credit, technology, the northern markets and I also receive subsidies for some products and yet I am still in trouble they have no answers.

I want to finish by asking two questions

The first is how we can do more to get governments, consumers and society in general to understand farming and farmers both north and south so that we can come up with a sustainable future for agriculture. Because somehow we must do so.

The second is one that has only just come to me over the last few weeks following my international meetings this year and that is

- What are we going to do with all the people displaced from agriculture and the numbers are staggering when you start to add them up
 - India up to 250 million
 - China up to 250 million
 - Other developing countries up to 250 million

And even in Europe many millions in countries like Poland who are due to join the EU, will be forced of the land by policy, by economics and some will leave in hope of a better future in urban areas.

When added up I believe we could have up to three-quarters of a billion people

looking for employment outside agriculture in the next 10 to 15 years. The International Labour Office says that in 1999 150 million world-wide were unemployed and up to one billion underemployed

So what are we going to do with another $\frac{3}{4}$'s of a billion people looking for jobs?

----- Taking the Vision 2020 answer we could of course have one hell of a service sector----- but I think it far more likely we will see civil unrest on a large scale.

Finally

We all have to wake up to the fact that food and those whose skills produce it are vital for our very survival, and that it is far more important to us than the profits of a few big corporations.

None of us will survive very long by eating money and living in a badly damaged environment.

Governments and others around the world have to be prepared to listen, learn and make decisions for a truly sustainable system of world food production, and one which does not exploit rural people and the environment for the financial gain of the few.

Thank you.