

Food and Farming: Warwick Leaflets

The Importance of Agriculture

"The fundamental basis of the community is agriculture."

It states quite clearly in the Bahá'í writings that agriculture is the most important industry. This basic truth, which is often overlooked, is obvious because without sufficient food we would starve. Less obvious to those who are part of an industrial civilisation, is the fact that it is the fundamental basis of the economics of a country.

"Commerce, industry, agriculture and the general affairs of the country are all intimately linked together. If one of these suffers an abuse, the detriment affects the mass."

"Special regard must be paid to agriculture.... unquestionably it precedeth the others."

One simple example is the connection between farming and tourism. Farming practices affect the attractiveness of the landscape and so encourage or discourage visitors.

If the economics of farming are balanced and successful, the rest will follow.

Agricultural Advances

The skill and care of the farmer and the horticulturist result in improvement:

"A grain of wheat, when cultivated by the farmer, will yield a whole harvest, and a seed, through the gardener's care, will grow into a great tree."

"Deprived of cultivation, the mountain slopes would be jungles and forests without fruitful trees. The gardens bring forth fruits and flowers in proportion to the care and tillage bestowed upon them by the gardener."

Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote in 1912:

"Would the agricultural methods of the ancients suffice in the twentieth century? Transportation in the former ages was restricted to conveyance by animals. How would it provide for human needs today? If modes of transportation had not been transformed, the teeming millions now upon the earth would die of starvation... How could great cities such as London and New York subsist if dependent upon ancient means of conveyance?"

The methods of agriculture must progress, as with any other science, as knowledge increases, but the practices must still work in harmony with nature and the ecological systems:

"In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil."

The Basis of Good Health

Bahá'ís believe that the immediate cause of illness is an imbalance in the component substances of the body, which allows disease to take hold. Healing is therefore possible by eating the correct foods in order to redress the balance. It also follows that the foods need to be pure, healthy and balanced in the first place so as not to introduce disease or allow it to develop. This means that methods of agriculture are of crucial importance. Bearing in mind the above quotation on moderation, farmers departing too far from natural processes are likely to bring unwanted side-effects. For example, the production of new strains of plants by genetic modification or by selective breeding, whilst gaining some advantages in the short term, may lose other qualities or nutritious elements which are more important in the long run.

Some other causes of concern might be the regular use of chemical fertilisers or pesticides, feeding of livestock on items which would not naturally form part of their diet, and the routine use of antibiotics for livestock.

Kindness to Animals

Although Bahá'ís are not forbidden to eat meat, kindness to animals is given great stress:

"...it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature."

This would preclude practices such as battery farming, veal crating and other intensive methods which cause distress to livestock.

In addition, the Bahá'í writings state that:

"The food of the future will be fruits and grains. The time will come when meat will no longer be eaten" our natural food is that which grows out of the ground. The people will gradually develop up to the condition of this natural food."

Therefore Bahá'ís expect that agriculture will gradually change to arable farming alone, using much less land than livestock farming to provide the same amount of nourishment.

Financial Security

An underlying problem with the agricultural economy is the continual change in the fortunes of farmers, depending on market forces, weather and other factors. To help cope with this situation, the Bahá'í Writings specify a village fund, known as the storehouse. This is a model based on a village farming community but the principles can also be extended to towns and cities:

"To solve this problem we must begin with the farmer..... In every village there must be established a general storehouse which will have a number of revenues...."

Most of the revenues are based on the use of the land. One is a graduated tax on farmers who are in profit, another is a percentage of profits from mining or extraction work. Those who do not work on the land will likewise pay a percentage of their surplus income. Local trustees will pay out from this storehouse to those in need, including farmers during the lean years.

In essence, this financial storehouse is very different from the present arrangements. It is a permanent and local system which emphasises the fundamental importance of a successful agricultural economy.

This system will also operate on a regional and national level. Any surplus from the local storehouse would be sent to a central fund, for use in less fortunate areas. Likewise the local area would receive help from this central fund if this became necessary.

The Future

"Strive as much as possible to become proficient in the science of agriculture."

Bahá'ís believe agriculture to be of the first importance. Its effects on the health of the population, on the environment and on the economics of an area are immeasurable. As with all human endeavour, it should be pursued with high ethical values, as a service to humanity. Farmers deserve respect, help and scientific guidance on the best way to produce healthy food or beneficial cash crops for market.

Bahá'ís foresee a future where the landscape will have changed as far fewer animals are farmed, the maintenance of a balanced, healthy environment is paramount, the economics of farming are mastered and the general population enjoys much better health.