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NJPN conference news  
Written by Paul Donovan

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Alistair McIntosh, a Scottish Christian broadcaster, warned that today society has become "spiritually blinded by the love of money."

The relationship between humankind and the earth has been broken and needs mending.

"People have become richer, money has replaced relationships," said Alistair, who despaired that the understanding of where food comes from and whether exploitation took place along the way has been lost.

Alistair told of when he was growing up in the 1960s, there was much more inter-community support going on. This resulted in resilience in the communities that was evident at the time of the 1966 seaman's strike. A state of emergency was declared and the pound plunged but people in the Isle of Lewes, where Alistair grew up, were able to cope.

He contrasted this with a situation today where supermarkets only hold 24 hours supply of goods. "We have a just in time supply system - all driven by oil," said Alistair, who called for land reform, a reconnection with the earth and deepening of the understanding of grace in ecological terms.

In short, communities must be rebuilt that are resilient and not dependent on oil.

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Diana Kateregga, a refugee from Uganda, told of what it is really like coming to the UK and having to live in destitution. She moved from charity to charity looking for support and from friend to friend looking for somewhere to live, finally ending up working with the Jesuit Refugee Service.

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Columban Father Shay Cullen warned that humankind is in the process of destroying the planet.

He called on people to challenge this state of affairs. "We can empower and enable each other and make this a more just world," said Shay, who highlighted how there was nothing that dehumanised humans more than abject poverty and hunger.

Shay told how there are 1 billion people hungry today, some 642 million of them in Asia. There are a further 265 million in Sub Saharan Africa and 53 million in Latin America. Some 15 million of the hungry live in developed world countries.

Shay warned of the forces of evil in the world with no respect for life, who would deny the most basic constituents of life like water. "There are 146 million more people hungry today than in 2008," said Shay. "Children are the first to be deprived, if they don't get nutrition in the early years, they can suffer brain damage."

Shay told of how developed countries were making grabs for land in the developing world. This has seen large parts of Africa effectively taken over by European nations. China has moved into the Philippines. The move to running vehicles on ethanol, meant there is even greater pressure on land. He told how in Brazil for instance, cars run on ethanol which has had a knock on effect by putting more pressure on the rain forests as agribusiness goes looking for more land to cultivate.

It was not all gloom and doom though with Shay offering a ray of hope in the work of his Preda Foundation in the Philippines. Preda has been operating for 25 years, developing fair trade products like mangos to sell into countries like Germany and the UK. In an aside, Shay told that the Co-op will not take the Preda Forest Feast Mango juice.

Some of the funds raised from the fair trade operations are used to fund a project that helps girls who have been the victims of trafficking. "There are 120 children in the two homes at the moment," said Shay.

Hundreds of children have been put into the prisons and Preda has helped them to find " a new life and different way of living."

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Sally Leigh of Housing Justice gave a powerful testimony of surviving in Britain today. She told first of training to become a dancer, with eight hours training every day.

The teacher would go round the class barking out orders of "one stone, half a stone" indicating the amount that each in the class had to lose in weight. She kept a log covering every calorie expended for four years.

Sally left the dance school but still carried some scars. "It took me two years before I could eat without feeling guilty and I won't have scales in the house now," said Sally. "Anorexia and weight is a real problem in our society."

Sally then told of her efforts at the grass roots to create resilient communities, working locally to run farmers markets, allotments and local heritage projects.

She told of the liberating effect of working on her allotment, growing food with others in community. "Everyone should have access to land, everyone should be able to have an allotment," said Sally, who told how difficult it was struggling to bring up two children on low incomes in UK PLC.

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Elizabeth Dowler, Warwick University professor and trustee of the Food Ethics Council, declared that the "world comes to us in the UK on a plate" but at huge environmental cost to the planet. The food system is very economically efficient, with globalised distribution networks and concentrated ownership all helping to bring efficiency. "We have cheap food in Britain because other people and the environment are paying the price," said Elizabeth, who pointed out that most food - except for fruit and vegetables - comes to this country from Europe.

The system is efficient but destructive, exploiting people in the food chain as well as the environment. "Some 20 per cent of the UK's annual carbon dioxide emissions come from the food system and that is not just transport," said Elizabeth, who warned that more emissions still come from consumers driving to the shops.

Elizabeth revealed that there are now more obese people in the world than undernourished and the two groups overlap in places. She told how poorer people often suffer the worst type of food deprivation.

Shops don't invest in poorer areas and the products often cost more there. At time of dire poverty people sometimes cut back on food in order that they can pay other bills like gas and electricity. The price of food has gone up over the last couple of years. It has increased by 57 per cent in the last decade.

Elizabeth called for more people growing their own food and reconnecting with the earth. "We must bring food with shorter supply chains," said Elizabeth, who also called for people to eat less meat.

### Big Debate

The debate split largely between Patrick Mulvany of the UK Food Group and Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecologist, who argued for organic production to answer the problems of feeding the world and David Howlett, who has been head of research at the UK Government's Dept. of International Development, thought all means including genetic engineering should be on the table.

Patrick declared the scourge of hunger in the world to be obscene. "There is plenty of food, the world has no problem producing food, it is distributing it that is the problem," said Patrick, who emphasised the importance of food sovereignty and building up local resilience.

David declared that organic agriculture alone will not feed the world. "We need an ecological approach but we also need to maximise the use of modern science, even looking at GM technology," said David.

Vandana argued that when you measure organic production in terms of nutrients organics provide more food.

Alison Austin, who is a consultant for supermarkets, urged people to be agents of change and to challenge everything you read, hear and see. She believes that corporate executives will listen if lobbied persistently.

The question of eating meat arose, with David pointing out that it takes 15,000 litres of water per kilogramme to produce meat compared to 500 litres for a kilogram of grain.

Vandana Shiva -

International environmentalist Vandana Shiva accused bio-technology companies of peddling lies with their claims of saving the world with genetically modified technologies.

Vandana dismissed the companies claims of saving the world as a public relations ploy intended, in the main, to disguise a grab for control of the food chain.

She told how over the past 25 years the companies had campaigned first to for international treaties that enabled them to get a monopoly and then to patent "God's creation" (seeds).

One company that received much criticism for this grab at life sources was Monsanto. "Monsanto doesn't create seed, it corrupts seed. Seed creates seed. These company's are positioning themselves as God," said Vandana, who called for a disinvestment campaign from Monsanto.

She told of the damage already being done by GM technology across the world, including 5.4 million acres in the US that have now been taken over by superweeds, after using genetically modified products.

She also claimed that not only were one billion people without food in the world today but two billion have food related diseases.

"Genetic engineering is a crude technology, not a science," said Vandana, who referred to terminator technology that stops plants reproducing as "evil." Though banned by UN convention, Vandana reported that in India they are getting more and more cases of seeds not reproducing themselves.

Vandana claimed that GM technology is at the heart of new hunger and poverty, rather than saving the planet. "There is no yield gain. How can it be cheaper if there are royalties on each seed," said Vandana.

The Indian environmental scientist warned that the GM companies were building up the pressure on Europe to accept their technologies this year. "We believe seed has to be saved and used for the future. If we don't have seeds, we cannot be food sovereign," said Vandana, who believes the way forward is to get back to the earth. "Ecological cultivation is the solution to solving problems of hunger and unemployment. 50 per cent of those not getting jobs would have livelihoods on the land," said Vandana, who called on countries in the North like the UK to turn away from privatisation and look to "a transition to ecological agriculture."

She urged people to support the expansion of seed banks.