

OCT **Farmers of the Future**

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[Danielle Nierenberg](#) Africa, Agriculture, Education, Farmers, Food, Food Security, Health, Hunger, Income,

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Interview by Daniel Kane

Robin Mednick is the Executive Director and Vice President of Pencils for Kids, a Toronto non-profit focused on providing school supplies and building schools for children in Niger. John Craig is a co-founder of Eliminate Poverty Now, a New Jersey non-profit focused on creating economic opportunity for people in Africa through employment education and child development. Recently, both organizations teamed up with Dov Pasternak, a scientist with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) who's spent the last decade working with smallscale farmers in Niger, to pilot Farmers of the Future, a program aimed at giving young people the skills to transition from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture.

The mission of FOF is stated as enabling small farmers to make the transition from subsistence farming to agribusiness by educating young people. Why is that transition an important goal?



Pencils for Kids and Eliminate Poverty Now have partnered with Dov Pasternak from ICRISAT to pilot Farmers of the Future, a program aimed at educating young people about sustainable agriculture and empowering them to create their own agricultural enterprises. (Photo credit: Bernard Pollack)

John Craig: When we first started our organization, we were broadly interested in economic and educational development in Africa. On the economic development side what we quickly came to appreciate is that in most of these areas where you're dealing with the rural poor, economic development is agricultural development, because that's what the economy is based on.

The key, then, to Africa being able to address hunger, nutrition, economic development, and agricultural development issues is that it needs to make the leap from subsistence farming to agribusiness. The mentality now is "grow a staple grain crop-enough to feed myself and my family." But we want people to start thinking, "farming can be a business, and let me see what I can grow that will generate the greatest income for me in the local market, so that I can take that money to buy whatever other food I need and hopefully have enough left over to be able to buy clothing, get shelter, and address whatever other essential needs I need to address." By showing these small farmers new techniques that are sustainable and can help them produce more high-value food, we can help them generate enough income that they can re-invest in their communities.

Why do you choose to focus on young people, rather than adults?

John Craig: In the course of all our correspondence, Dov Pasternak shared with me the work he had been doing in establishing this concept he called the African Market Garden. In it, he combines the drip irrigation technology used in Israel with a range of fruits and vegetables adapted to the soil and climate conditions into a package that a small farmer or farmers' co-operative can take to start a market garden to produce quality vegetables that will command a significant price in the local market. Over a period of five or six years, they've set up about 2500 gardens in eight different countries.

The Nourishing the Planet project will assess the state of agricultural innovations—from cropping methods to irrigation technology to agricultural policy—with an emphasis on sustainability, diversity, and ecosystem health, as well as productivity. The project aims to both inform global efforts to eradicate hunger and raise the profile of these efforts. Questions? Comments? Please contact co-project director Danielle Nierenberg at dnierenberg@worldwatch.org

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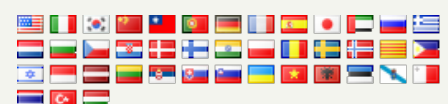
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In the process of doing that project he kept finding it difficult to get farmers to adopt this whole new way of doing agriculture. He had to be very careful to address people's attitudes, traditions, and backgrounds. So he thought, "Why don't I start with a whole new generation and share with them a whole new idea of what agriculture has the potential to do? Because if I can get to them young and teach them these new techniques, they'll be open and receptive to this notion of agribusiness."

What exactly does the program entail? What steps are you taking to involve youth in the program and engage their interest?

John Craig: In my mind FOF is a combination of three things I'm familiar with from the United States. To me it's like one part classroom activity, one part 4-H club, and one part Junior Achievement. First we try to provide these kids a certain grounding in the fundamentals of agriculture in the classroom through lessons. We're developing, too, a special curriculum with FAO-Niger to be used in the program. At the same time, to really make it come alive the children get hands-on experience using the techniques they've learned in a small garden by the school. Third, since the whole goal is to create agribusiness out of this, we're trying to give the students a taste for creating their own business and their own little economic opportunity by having them sell the produce in the local market and come up with other business ideas.

Robin Mednick: Another way we got children involved was by having them start a tree nursery. We noticed during mango season, when everybody was eating a lot of mangoes, they were spitting the pits out and there were just pits everywhere on the ground. So we had the children collect all those pits and plant them to create a tree nursery, and then these trees will be grafted with other species, providing the village with another food source. But also by having the children participate, they're also learning these new skills like how to care for trees and grafting. Participation equals learning.

Out of that success we started a program within FOF called Trees for Kids utilizing this fruit tree that Dov and ICRISAT developed called the Pomme du Sahel, which is a wild Jujubier tree from Niger grafted to a domesticated Jujubier tree from India. It's incredibly productive, producing up to 20kg of fruit over a season that's incredibly nutritious. Then some folks from ICRISAT taught 30 kids from six villages how to do the grafting and they were able to go around and do it for farmers. So the program was able to give these children employment while also helping the village produce more food.

What role does education play in the alleviation of hunger and poverty versus, say, aid or technology?

John Craig: It's one thing to have the technology available, it's another to get it broadly adopted and practiced. With technology we could create a handful of big corporate agricultural enterprises that are going to be like plantations. But if you're going to get to the smallholders and help them- and from an economic development standpoint in rural Africa that's who you're focusing on- you can't just lay out the technology or techniques in front of them. The key to adopting it is education.

So for example, just getting people to appreciate the power of irrigation, I think, is a huge step forward. In the Sahel, rain comes in short bursts at one time of the year and is normally only enough to yield one crop a year. But if you can harness and contain that water you can get three or four valuable crops a year. So educating people about something as simple as irrigation, not just giving them the technology, but giving them knowledge of how to irrigate has tremendous potential to help people make the shift from subsistence agriculture to agribusiness.

Robin Mednick: Education is the key to everything. It gives people imagination and helps them tap into their potential. Education helps open up their creativity.

I was very excited about FOF because it married what we are about at Pencils for Kids, education, with agriculture. Because if the kids don't have proper nutrition and aren't eating, and the parents don't have the money to support their kids enough in school with books and supplies, then nothing that we can teach will make any difference. And since so many of these children will be farmers in their future, it only behooves them to emphasize in their time at school a lot of stuff about agriculture. FOF was bringing the best of all the worlds together, which was why we wanted to pilot the program in Liboré.

Have you found that students share their new knowledge with parents and others in community?

Robin Mednick: Part of our thinking is that children will develop ideas for small businesses in the context of the garden that they'll hopefully bring home and share with their parents. Because it's not just the children that can learn, we want them to share their knowledge with their parents and the adults in the community,

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Nourishing the Planet In light of Slow Food International's upcoming Terra Madre event -- we asked Seck Madieng who is part of Mangeons Locale (a Slow Food project in Senegal) to provide a video response to our question series: "Where Would You Like To See More Agricultural Funding Directed?" --- What is your answer???

Part 58: Where Would You Like To See More Agricultural Funding Directed?

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as well. Similarly, the women of the village are being encouraged to develop their own projects adjacent to the FOF garden at the school, so that they can be nearby and hopefully learn from the program, too. A large percentage of the developing world's small farmers are women, so it's important to reach out to them, too, and encourage them to create their own businesses.

Where would you like to see more agricultural funding directed?

John Craig: Well, a combination of things really. First I think there's certainly a role for technology to play in agricultural development. People need access to clean water, and they need crops that will work in their climatic conditions. And technology can definitely help with those things. But like I said earlier, even if the technology's available, unless you address the mindset of the people you're trying to help and educate them, the technology won't be adopted. So education is definitely something that needs to be funded.

Robin Mednick: I agree with John. Funding educational programs to give people the skills they need to create businesses. And if organizations can see the importance of doing that, I think there's great potential to really change things up and help people.

Daniel Kane is a research intern with the Nourishing the Planet project.

Africa, Eliminate Poverty Now, Farmers of the Future, Hunger, ICRISAT, International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, John Craig, Niger, Nourishing the Planet, Pencils for Kids, Robin Mednick, Worldwatch

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