



What is the Cost of Agricultural Progress?

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Abstract

This learning module will help students appreciate how changes in farming methods have impacted the wellbeing of farming communities in India, and see how difficult it is to both develop new technologies and recover traditional practices at the same time, especially when it comes to feeding a rapidly growing population. An underlying goal is to encourage students to consider and critically evaluate their own preconceptions about what counts as progress, and to think philosophically about arguments for and against adopting new farming methods.

Story Link

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2018/04/24/feeding-india-back-to-the-future/>

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2018/04/20/in-india-this-group-helps-turn-wasteland-into-greener-pastures/>

Intended Audience

Students in courses in Applied Ethics or Moral Theology, such as Environmental Ethics, Food Ethics, Agricultural Ethics, and Theology and the Environment. The questions presuppose that students have at least some background knowledge about the basics of Deontological and Utilitarian models of ethical reasoning, and some familiarity with how to construct and evaluate philosophical arguments.

Description of Video

In these 2 videos we hear from farmers, scientists, and community activists trying to solve crises related to India's rapid population growth and the diminishing returns of the "Green Revolution" begun in India in the 1960's. The country is seeing rapid demographic change as sustenance farmers are moving into cities. The average age of farmers is increasing, soil quality is worsening, and the planet keeps getting hotter. How can such a populous nation grow enough food to feed its citizens, and what kind of economic and ecological tradeoffs will they have to make to meet the demand for food? How can recovering agricultural practices of the past revitalize farming today, and how can such practices be combined with new methods? These videos raise important ethical questions about the impact of agricultural practice, research, and policy on the environmental health of a people. Furthermore, the issues make us confront fundamental questions about the nature and value of progress.

Topics addressed in the videos

Ethical issues stemming from the Green Revolution, Sustainable Farming, Global Warming, Work and Human Flourishing, Community Collaboration

Learning Goals

1. Students should be able to identify and critically assess some of the benefits and harms brought about by the Green Revolution.
2. Students should be able to analyze the ethical implications of the problems and solutions presented in the videos, and should so do by constructing arguments for and against agricultural reform. If students have background knowledge of ethical theory, they should be able to use deontological and utilitarian paradigms to construct those arguments.
3. Students should be able to make comparisons between what they know about agriculture in their own cultural context and the Indian context described in the videos, in order to engage in personal reflection about their own views about the commercialization of agriculture. (If students live in the U.S., the advance readings can be used to help them with this objective.)

Advance Reading for this Module:

"We Need a New Green Revolution," New York Times op-ed, January 4, 2016

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/04/opinion/we-need-a-new-green-revolution.html?smid=pl-share>

"Response to the New York Times op-ed on the Green Revolution," Berry Center Website

<https://berrycenter.org/2017/03/26/response-recent-new-york-times-op-ed-green-revolution/>

Class discussion questions:

1. In what ways are the farmers in the videos better off now than they would have been a few generations ago? In what ways are they worse off?
2. What do the farmers in these videos have to say about the relationship between farming and wellbeing? What do the statistics about suicide rates among farmers suggest?
3. In “Back to the Farm,” Changemaker, Jagdeesh Rao of the Foundation for Ecological Security says two factors are essential for positive change: the land’s ability to heal itself, and people’s ability to collaborate. How do you see those two factors at work in the initiatives highlighted in these two videos?

In-class Argument Activity

Either as individuals or as groups, have students chose from proposals (a) and (b) below, and come up with both a Utilitarian argument and a Deontological Argument either for or against that proposal. If students do not have background knowledge of Utilitarianism and Deontology, encourage them to come up with arguments that start with different background assumptions.

Proposals:

The Government should divert a percentage of funding from research on advanced agricultural technologies to research on the traditional seed varieties used before the Green Revolution

- a) It would be good to give financial incentives for city-dwellers in India to move back to work on farms in rural areas.
- b) Have students share their arguments with the class and discuss their strengths.

Big Picture Question for Students to Ponder

How should we balance thinking about sustainable soil health and present demand for food (in other words, conserving for the future or feeding mouths today)? What might this balance say about how we should conceptualize ‘progress’?

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