Food for Thought

BY AFRAH YAFAI

Experts project that 42 million Americans, including 13 million children, will experience food insecurity in 2021. According to Feeding America (https://secure.feedingamerica.org), in 2019, food insecurity, at its lowest, affected 35 million people. Yet the amount of food waste in this country remains dangerously high, with more than $161 billion worth of food wasted each year — nearly 40% of all food.

What exactly is food waste? This term is defined as any food thrown away at homes, restaurants and stores. It is also common for crops to be left in fields due to low prices (less profit for farmers), transportation costs and if the crops don’t meet the appearance...
This summer, we witnessed wildfires rage through the American West, stronger hurricanes storm the Gulf and East coasts, severe drought in the Upper Midwest and record-breaking high temperatures in the Pacific Northwest.

Clearly, extreme weather patterns are becoming highly unpredictable and more intense due to climate change. This affects people’s lives and livelihoods, for these disasters destroy homes and crops and cause the public’s health, as well as air and water quality, to deteriorate.

Although this is nothing new, some policymakers continue to stall or preempt urgent climate policies because they claim that the price tag of implementing policies to reverse these negative realities is “too high.” The costs of continued inaction, however, far outweighs that of taking action.

Islam and many other faiths link the ecological crisis to humanity’s ethics and values. The balance of our ecosystem has long been disrupted and, unfortunately, the overconsumption and overexploitation by a few have inflicted a disproportionate level of injustice upon the most vulnerable.

For a community to become resilient, it really comes down to centering justice at the foundation of climate adaptation and resilience strategies. Marginalized groups, such as communities of color, low-income, older, and disabled people, are more impacted by climate disasters than other communities.

On top of the global pandemic looming over our society, they also face greater barriers when it comes to recovering from power outages, housing displacements, mobility limitations and food shortages.

Community organizations have been key leaders in fostering climate justice on the local level. Last summer, Iowa experienced a derecho — a line of intense, widespread and fast-moving windstorms and sometimes thunderstorms that moves across a great distance and is characterized by damaging winds — that greatly impacted communities through the loss of power and even, for some, of their homes.

Cedar Rapids, a city in eastern Iowa, was the hardest hit. After the derecho, many individuals and organizations showed up to help its people recover.

“My sister-in-law works at a church in Cedar Rapids where they provided food, water and [other] supplies to their neighbors who had been hit by the derecho. They showed grace, care and compassion to anyone who needed help,” says Irene DeMaria, associate director at Iowa Interfaith Power and Light.

A year later, Rama Muzo and his colleagues at the Intercultural Center of Iowa are still working hard to help those communities who were deeply impacted by the storm — mostly people of color, refugees and immigrants who live in poorly maintained buildings on the city’s south side.

“The disaster shed light on the lack of investments and exacerbated the housing crisis in this part of the city. Our people are still struggling, and we are helping them secure good housing and employment, and ultimately build sustainable family health and wealth,” says Muzo.

While faith and BIPOC leaders and organizations often step up to lift up their communities, lawmakers must finally begin to strategize and implement legislation that will ensure effective and long-term disaster preparedness on the local and state levels.

Climate adaptation and resilience strategies for cities and states can take the form of installing distributed solar panels in key locations like hospitals, schools or grocery stores to reduce reliance on power lines, which are vulnerable to extreme weather. This could be paired with battery
however, it is also simply telling us how to care for our people and planet and how to handle the ensuing backlash. We see taking care of Earth as a responsibility given to us by God, an *amana* (trust) that we must uphold and fulfill. So, when I’m told that issues of environmental justice aren’t for me and are larger than me, I respectfully disagree. Yes, there are policies put in place made by public officials who socially hold more power than I do — that is a loaded statement.

However, because of who I am and what my faith teaches me, absolutely nothing can make me second guess my responsibility and capability. Islam is justice expressed not only through the words of God in the Quran, but also by the actions of Prophet Muhammad. He emphasized the importance of the rights of women and children, liberation from slavery and debt, and standing up for those who felt overshadowed.

It’s normal to feel despair when looking at the issues surrounding our world today. But, as Muslims, we believe that any injustice will be dealt with on the Day of Resurrection, when everyone will be held accountable for what they did while living on this planet. This doesn’t mean that we should lay back and wait for God to deal with this, for we are required to care about these matters. It is our faith.

As Abu Sa‘id al-Khudri narrates: “Whosoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith” ("Sahih Muslim"). This emphasizes the importance of acting against injustice, even if the most you can do is to hate it within your heart.

While discussing the command to be merciful in his paper “Mercy, The Stamp of Creation” (https://www.theoasisinitiative.org/nawawi-mercy), Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah states: “In imitation of the Prophet [peace be upon him], Muslims are expected to be merciful, to bring good, and to seek the benefit of others ...” He emphasizes that he and other commentators point out that this mercy is not exclusive to Muslims, but is for the believing and unbelieving, and our mercy extends beyond humans. We are commanded to be merciful to animals, birds, plants, trees and to everything on Earth.

To not be merciful is to go against what God has commanded of us — to care and show respect for all the blessings that God has bestowed upon us. And this is the beauty of Islam.

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storeage to serve as a backup generator. This system played an important role in Puerto Rico’s recovery after Hurricane Maria ravaged the island in September 2017.

Other efforts include developing stormwater management practices, such as promoting natural buffers that control soil erosion and reduce flooding impacts. Policymakers must also begin to understand the wisdom behind increased funding for emergency services, especially in rural areas, as well as community centers that provide shelter and sustenance.

The budget reconciliation package currently being negotiated in Congress includes provisions related to the physical, natural and social infrastructures that not only better prepare communities for disasters, but also reduce climate change’s various impacts.

Congress needs to follow through with this legislation, as this is a rare opportunity to ensure a sustainable future for our communities and younger generations.

After decades of ignorance and inaction, it’s long past time that lawmakers put people and the planet first and choose justice and compassion over all other concerns.

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