

U.N. executive Ertharin Cousin: Multilateral approaches key to solving resource issues

A lumna Ertharin Cousin (J.D.'82), the executive director of the United Nations World Food Programme, performed double duty when she returned to the Peach State in February. She delivered the keynote address at a *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law* conference and spoke to more than 100 fellow Georgia Law alumnae at the law school's annual gathering for female graduates.

In her presentation at the "International Law in a Time of Scarcity" conference, Cousin said we live on a small planet that is incapable of physical expansion to match the growth of the human population.

"Some experts predict that by 2050, the world's population will reach 9 billion, and according to some estimates, global requirements for food will increase by 70 percent," she added.

Much of the world currently battles hunger and poverty, according to Cousin.

"In 2008, over 20 countries ... experienced food riots; populations taking to the streets in desperation and panic because they can't afford to buy their daily sustenance. In 2011, young people in the Arab Spring rallied entire nations with calls for freedom, social justice and, in many cases, for bread," she said.

Further illustrating the scope of this serious situation is the fact that nearly 870 million people – one in eight of the world's population – are food insecure, meaning they do not have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food at all times.

Cousin said that historically the U.N. World Food Programme's role was to "get large amounts of food to large numbers of people quickly and efficiently. ... But, the global community now accepts the fact that providing food alone will not, and cannot, sustainably address the issue of global food insecurity."

The U.N.'s move from food aid to food assistance includes the provision of "tools" including but not limited to: safety nets, climate smart agriculture support, adaptive irrigation and water resource management, cooperative developments and supporting equitable access to land and other natural resources with equitable access to resources, particularly for women.

From an operator's viewpoint, Cousin outlined the three main causes of resource scarcity:

- Demand Induced Scarcity, which occurs when the demand for specific renewable resources cannot be met by the existing supply of those resources. The example Cousin provided was that water or cropland may initially meet all needs of a population, but population growth, foreign investment in agricultural land, new technologies, population migration and even conflict over time can reduce per capita availability of resources.
- Supply Induced Scarcity, which occurs when environmental degradation, pollution, natural variation or a breakdown in the delivery infrastructure constrains or reduces the supply or local availability of a specific resource. Cousin elaborated that in the hunger relief world, too often the consequence of resource reduction results from supply induced scarcity,

which creates competition among livelihood groups for access to resources.

- Structural Scarcity, which is created or evidenced by unequal access to resources, poor natural resource governance, cultural practices, gender dynamics, social and economic barriers as well as historical land use practices. Cousin stated that some experts argue these are the "root issues or real issues" affecting resource availability, particularly among the hungry poor in the developing globe.

Citing lessons learned by countries such as China and Brazil in overcoming obstacles of resource scarcity, Cousin believes critical global resource issues can be addressed and solved in other areas of the world.

"It can be done. It's been done before. Fifty years ago, scholars in China predicted that the famine prone China would never feed its rapidly increasing population. They argued that the problems of resource scarcity were not only demand induced (by the growing population in China) but also structural because of China's poor governance policy and the social as well as economic issues plaguing the then 'third world country.'"

In closing her keynote address, Cousin said she believes that multilateral approaches are essential for finding enduring solutions to today's complex problems.

"Today, we have at our fingertips all the tools and technologies to access knowledge and assist us better in solving problems; tools earlier generations could only dream about. Whether we use these tools and technologies to solve problems together or to pull our world further apart in a short-sighted lose-lose competition for resources or a market are a choice that every one of us must make in our daily life. It's our choice. But as we choose our future path, it's important to remember: We live on a small and finite planet ... we must all choose wisely."



Of the many lessons Ertharin Cousin (J.D.'82) (left) said she learned as a student of the late U.S. Secretary of State and Georgia Law Professor Dean Rusk was that international law requires an understanding of geopolitical, historical and anthropological issues as well as knowledge of an ever evolving set of international laws. "Since I've left his class, I have learned that particularly when working in the multilateral world, it never hurts to have access to theologians from the Christian, Muslim and Hebrew faiths. Without going too far afield, suffice it to say that so often how nations interact with each other, with their people and with their resources, is often times better understood and more effectively critiqued when one understands the faith and beliefs of those making the decisions." In this photo, she is talking with a conference attendee and Associate Dean Paul Kurtz.