Per Pinstrup-Andersen strives to fix the global food system and eliminate world hunger, one student at a time.

BY TED V. BOSCIA

Without ever leaving Savage Hall, Per Pinstrup-Andersen’s students become players in global food policy. One class session, they consider Russian land-use policies in the eyes of lawmakers and landowners. In another, the plight of Tanzanian farmers seeking broader access to international markets comes into focus. In a third, students must gain stakeholder consensus for a policy solution that reverses the degradation of Peruvian soils.
Pinstrup-Andersen has adopted a social entrepreneurship approach—what he defines as “stimulating innovative and creative ideas as an alternative to the conventional wisdom and failed thinking of the past”—to educate Cornell undergraduate and graduate students about the social, political, economic, and scientific factors that influence the food system and, ultimately, world hunger. In the undergraduate course Food Policy for Developing Countries and the graduate-level Globalization, Food Security, and Nutrition, students investigate a set of case studies derived from real-world circumstances, such as the 2002 Malawi famine or disruptions in the Mexican coffee trade, and make policy recommendations.

“We are taking the case into the classroom rather than the classroom to the case,” says Pinstrup-Andersen, the H. E. Babcock Professor of Food, Nutrition, and Public Policy in the Division of Nutritional Sciences; the J. Thomas Clark Professor of Entrepreneurship; and professor of applied economics and management.

The lessons flow from Pinstrup-Andersen’s belief that technological advancements in the biological sciences and improved agricultural practices alone cannot eliminate global hunger. Scientific innovation must be combined with investment in developing countries’ rural infrastructure, education, and health services and with diplomatic and political solutions that convince broken governments to act, Pinstrup-Andersen says.

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Pinstrup-Andersen gained these insights as a food and nutrition policy researcher on multiple continents and as director general of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington, D.C. At IFPRI, he launched the 2020 Vision Initiative, which is credited with bringing about policies and programs that have reduced the hunger and suffering of more than 8 million people. In 2001, he earned the World Food Prize, widely considered as agriculture’s Nobel Prize, for these efforts.

As a result, the case studies and the professor’s charge to think entrepreneurially are more than an ivory tower exercise. Pinstrup-Andersen points out the urgent need to address the root causes of malnutrition, which afflicts 15 percent of the world population, or about 1.02 billion people, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (The 2009 figures are a sharp increase from FAO’s 2006 estimate of 854 million malnourished people.)

His Cornell courses are an opportunity to train entrepreneurs who can invent feasible solutions to eliminate chronic poverty and hunger.

“He often identifies that the students in his course will likely be future leaders—of institutions, enterprises, and, perhaps, countries,” says Phoebe Garfinkel, a first-year fellow at the Cornell Institute for Public Affairs who took both of Pinstrup-Andersen’s classes in fall 2009. “This type of empowerment is incredibly important and encouraging for students’ participation in the course.”

Over the semester, Pinstrup-Andersen’s classes will examine 12–15 case studies, more than 60 of which have been edited by the professor since 2004. The reports, many written by Cornell graduate students, pose policy questions related to global, national, and local food systems.

“These cases look at all angles of the international food system—health, nutrition, policymaking, international trade, and ethics,” Pinstrup-Andersen says. “The main point is to put students in the mindset of stakeholders and to train them to enact policies that address the root causes of food system failures.”

Each report portrays a historical or current food crisis in need of a solution, and a group of students act as policy advisers. They present their recommendations to
the class, with their peers representing the views of stakeholders large and small—from heads of state to small farmers. It results in a freewheeling discussion where students try to achieve a consensus that’s fair to all sides.

“The students learn that there usually is no answer to these problems that will satisfy all stakeholder groups,” says Pinstrup-Andersen, “and that a policy will go nowhere if there are not good reasons for all sides to participate.”

To amplify their impact, Pinstrup-Andersen has allowed free access to the case studies in print, on DVD, and on the web at http://cip.cornell.edu/gfs. He has led workshops in Bangladesh, Uganda, China, and other countries to show professors how to apply the material. He estimates that teachers at 40 universities in Africa, Asia, and the United States use them.

“The goal is to spread the case studies as far as possible,” says Pinstrup-Andersen, who in 2002 vowed to wear red socks every day until world hunger is eliminated. “People gain a great deal from them because they combine conceptual learning with real-world experience. Many of these people are leading the fight against hunger and have the power to have a genuine impact on the well-being of people in developing countries.”

A New Revolution

Long before he became a World Food Prize winner, Pinstrup-Andersen was on a path to be a farmer.

In the early 1950s, at age 14, he left school to work on his family’s 50-acre farm in Denmark. He planned to help his parents until he could buy his own farm. The dream died a few years later when he realized he’d never save enough.

With no more than a seventh-grade education, Pinstrup-Andersen was accepted to the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen, thanks in part to three years of practical experience in agriculture. He majored in agricultural economics and began a lifelong inquiry to understand the disparity between the extreme poverty in developing countries and the relative wealth in much of the developed world.

“It always struck me how one portion of the world could be so prosperous while so many others faced disease, hunger, and suffering every day,” he says.

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− Ambassador Kenneth Quinn, president of the World Food Prize Foundation.

In 1969, Pinstrup-Andersen completed his Ph.D. in agricultural economics at Oklahoma State University and became a researcher at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture in Colombia. There he investigated the link between human health and food systems, looking not only at food security but whether the poor were receiving adequate nutrition.

“I was the best and worse source on the subject, because I was the only one doing it,” he says. “Until then, there was a firewall between human health and food systems.”

As his career advanced, Pinstrup-Andersen homed in on agricultural solutions to world hunger, largely because 70 percent of the world’s poverty occurs in rural areas of developing countries, and poverty is inextricably linked to hunger. For the rural poor, access to arable land, drought-resistant crops, and functional markets—to grow and sell the crops necessary for survival—are critical to lifting themselves out of poverty. Unfortunately, corrupt governments in developing countries, fears about genetically modified crops, farm subsidies that favor developed countries, and other factors, often prevent policy solutions to world hunger from taking root, he points out.

When he became the IFPRI director general in 1992, Pinstrup-Andersen put these theories into practice. The 2020 Vision Initiative improved food policy and programs in a range of countries. In Egypt and Pakistan, leaders reformed unproductive food rationing and subsidy programs. Similar efforts in Uganda and Malawi greatly increased aid distribution.

Most of all, Pinstrup-Andersen is credited with refocusing world leaders’ priorities on battling poverty and hunger, according
to Ambassador Kenneth Quinn, president of the World Food Prize Foundation.

“Per’s leadership of the 2020 Vision Initiative, the most comprehensive and ambitious research and dissemination program ever undertaken on global food security, engaged policymakers and researchers from around the globe, moved food policy issues back to the forefront of the international agenda, and resulted in improved food security for millions in developing countries,” Quinn says. “Under Per’s direction, the 2020 Vision Initiative was a brilliant catalyst for policy change that jarred the international community out of a complacency it had fallen into in the late 1980s and early 1990s following the abundance achieved by the Green Revolution.”

Pinstrup-Andersen returned to Cornell in 2003, soon after completing his directorship at IFPRI. (He first taught at Cornell from 1987–1992, as a professor of food economics and founding director of the Cornell Food and Nutrition Policy Program.) Pinstrup-Andersen now focuses on training students to disentangle the web of factors that contribute to food insecurity and to advocate for sensible policy solutions, an approach that has drawn repeated praise from students.

“I learned that the most important skills you can have for policy development are the ability to assess the standpoints of the other stakeholders, and to reach a recommendation that is politically and financially feasible,” says Emily Nelson ’10, a senior in international agriculture and rural development. “As much as we found ourselves wanting to do everything possible, recognizing and working with the real-world limitations becomes critical to success.”

“Professor Pinstrup-Andersen is open to any argument from any subject area, promoting innovation and dialogue. I learned the ability to discuss any subject without falling into circular arguments. And his ability to present future scenarios that incorporate food systems, global hunger, corporate culture, and population pressure is mesmerizing,” says MPS graduate student Christian Pulver, who took the course Globalization and Food Policy.

In the final stages of his career, Pinstrup-Andersen, 70, is invigorated by such connections with students, whom he sees as the next generation of leaders in global food policy.

“It’s what excites me every working day and keeps me from retiring,” Pinstrup-Andersen says. “Cornell students are exceptionally bright, talented, and highly motivated. I have a tremendous opportunity to help prepare them for the big challenges they will meet down the road. It’s incredible to think that the students in my classroom will one day be in a position to lead the World Bank or serve as a minister of agriculture in a developing country.”