



GLOBAL VIEWS OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Reflections on the growing worldwide local food movement

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Asking the right questions

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One of the greatest challenges facing humanity is to make sufficient, nutritious, culturally appropriate food accessible, available, and affordable to a growing urban population with limited purchasing power — while also sustaining the livelihoods of rural producers, who are themselves often poor and net food buyers. The problem is further complicated by conflicts, economic crises, and environmental change, which constantly reshape the geography of the planet. That is why on 3 December 2012, and in parallel with day 5 of the 18th conference of parties on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)¹ (CoP 18) taking place in Doha, Qatar, the “Agriculture, Landscapes and Livelihood” session was organized by a group of international agencies to illustrate the organic linkage between people, environment, and food. During that day, hundreds of experts in agriculture, climate change, and livelihoods came together from diverse countries to discuss, among other topics, how to satisfy the growing food needs of

the world’s population while sustaining the livelihoods of those involved in the production, transformation, and trade of food. The meeting brought together representatives from the private sector and large corporations, along with technocrats. Even a few farmers were sighted on and around the podium. According to the official website, relevant blogs, and thousands of tweets, the event went extremely well; all participants underscored the importance of supporting agriculture and farming livelihoods in order to build resilience and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Seen from the global South, where Qatar is located, in spite of having one of the world’s

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¹ See more at <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>

highest GDP per capita (International Monetary Fund, 2012) and the world's highest greenhouse gas emissions per capita (World Resources Institute, 2012), the need to adjust the world's food systems to allow food producers to construct a better livelihood is imperative. For small farmers in the South, who produce up to 70 percent of the world's food (FAO, 2011), life is often untenable: while they produce most of the food we eat, they seem to have little or no

control over its price, which appears to be determined by trade and retail. And, as most have abandoned subsistence agriculture for specialization in the food system, most have to purchase the majority of the food they consume, which keeps them hostage to retail prices. This is why agrarian movements such as Via Campesina are growing, as they allow farmers to organize for collective bargaining.

These organizations are increasingly represented at international forums, such as the negotiations on food security that take place regularly at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome.

Analysts studying the livelihood/food systems nexus from a humanist perspective often base their work on two core postulates. One is that the global food system is dominated and controlled by large international corporations at all levels: the production (large capitalist and industrial farms), inputs (seeds, pesticides and fertilizers), trade (international exports), transformation (agro industries), and retail levels (superstore chains) (Corporate Watch UK, 2004). These act in synchronized fashion to exploit farmers and resources by maximizing surplus extraction, leaving to both just enough to survive.

The second postulate is that, under pressure from trade agreements and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-styled economic adjustments, export-oriented production based on comparative advantages now dominates the food systems. This has caused the demise of indigenous farming and food

systems and has resulted in the impoverishment of both land and people (McMichael, 2009). A direct result of trade-based agriculture has been an agrarian question that is expressed at the levels of both people and environment.² Economy of scale dictates that small farmers will disappear as they are outcompeted by industrial food production units that will re-employ them as exploited farmworkers. By the same token, large capitalist ventures in agriculture and food production

are insensitive and unresponsive to environmental sustainability requirements, and operate in dissonance with Mother Nature due to the laws of the market and to the ruthlessness of CEOs who seek to maximize investor profits and inflate their bonuses. Finally, export-oriented production also implies that the food regime is essentially global, and that trade is undesirable as it is immediately associated with

economic profiteers and other speculators.

The social response to this state of affairs has been a growth and resurgence of "local food systems" expressed as a mushrooming of farmers' markets and community supported agriculture programs, which are expected to enhance the livelihoods of small farmers. These ventures were once limited to the countries of the North, but they are now firmly taking root in the South, often driven by Northern-educated community leaders or by Northern organizations such as Slow Food. While they certainly have a role to play in the democratization of the food system, such initiatives cannot in and of themselves be the answer to the agrarian question.

While somewhat caricatural, both postulates are essentially true, at least to a certain extent. They adequately serve to illustrate the discontent of "small producers" and their rejection of "Band-Aid solutions" borne from the cogitation of international bureaucrats. Farmers' livelihoods have been

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² See examples of Egypt and Tunisia in Ayeb (2012).

declining worldwide: most of the world's poverty is rural, especially in countries of the South (IFAD, 2010). Moreover, rural is no longer synonymous with agricultural: small farmers worldwide have adopted diversified livelihood strategies, a blend of agricultural production and other forms of on-farm and off-farm employment. But for the vast majority of those looking for a decent life, migration remains the only option, allowing them to construct their own livelihood in urban centers while contributing to that of their extended families in the villages. In many ways, it is the income earned in urban centers that is contributing to the survival of the rural world.

In spite of the goodwill and efforts deployed by mainstream organizations as well as by civil society, we do not seem to be drawing nearer to a solution to the sustainable livelihoods/food system challenge. Perhaps we are not looking in the right place. For instance, little is known about the mechanisms by which the food system is controlled by international megacorporations, when it is small farmers who produce most of the food. Understanding this mechanism is imperative to developing a strategy to liberate the food system. Models of midlevel-scale trade through cooperative supply chain are badly needed as viable and fair alternatives to a dehumanized globalized food system.

Sustainable livelihoods must be recognized as a basic human right. Reforming or changing the food system to allow the food producers of the world — most of whom are small and disenfranchised — to engage in decent, sustainable livelihoods must become an international human priority. This endeavor cannot entail raising food prices, as both producers and nonproducers who are net food

buyers will suffer. Enhancing livelihoods from within the food system must come from reducing the profits of traders and intermediaries, captains of finance and of industry. Such resolutions were, unfortunately, glaringly absent from the recommendations³ of the CoP 18 jamboree. 

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³ See “Nations take ‘essential’ next step in climate change fight,” COP 18 (8 December 2012). <http://www.cop18.qa/en-us/News/SingleStory.aspx?ID=297>