



GLOBAL VIEWS OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Reflections on the growing worldwide local food movement

RAMI ZURAYK

Should farmers just say no?

Published online December 8, 2013

Citation: Zurayk, R. (2013). Should farmers just say no? *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 4(1), 11–14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2013.041.009>

Copyright © 2013 by New Leaf Associates, Inc.

In a world in which agriculture is increasingly dominated by industrial farming and international trade, there is one crop that is still profitable to small farmers. It is hardy, drought-tolerant, and thrives on marginal lands. Multinational corporations have not yet hijacked its seeds, and its cultivation requires limited capital investment. Marketing poses no real problem, and farm gate prices are often an order of magnitude higher than those of the next alternative crop. Its production is still concentrated in countries of the South, where it does not benefit from any market-distorting subsidy. And while it can be consumed locally, it is mainly an export crop, bringing in much needed hard currency. It is also a magnet for Northern

tourists coming to sample the produce “a la source.” The catch? It is illegal.

From the mountains of the Moroccan Rif to the Afghan Highlands, from the hills of Lesotho to the forests of Jamaica, the cultivation of cannabis is essential to the livelihoods of millions of people who live on marginal lands. In many southern countries it is unofficially tolerated, making it an extralegal rather than an illegal crop. Governments recognize, albeit covertly, that cannabis farming plays a crucial role in halting the massive exodus of farmers from rural areas where poverty is endemic. Take Morocco, for instance, the world’s largest producer and exporter of cannabis in the world, where *kif* (the local name for cannabis) is smuggled by boat to Spain across the Mediterranean and from there to the rest of Europe. The Spanish government doesn’t like it and the *Guardia* vigilantly polices Spain’s coastline. But the alternative to cannabis contraband is often the smuggling of North African migrants using the same route. As one *kif* producer put it, “*Kif* does not kill you, hunger does” (Martelli, 2013, para. 16), while the human toll from the illegal sea crossings keeps

Rami Zurayk is professor at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. He studied at the American University of Beirut and at Oxford University, UK. His research addresses issues at the nexus of food, landscapes, and livelihoods. He is an active member of Lebanese civil society and a founder of Slow Food Beirut. He can be contacted at ramizurayk@gmail.com.

increasing. Similar stories are echoed in most cannabis-producing regions in the world.

Due to the illegal nature of cannabis production, systematic, rigorous research on the nature and operation of the cannabis value chain and of the power structures that surround it is scant. Indeed, such research is fraught with physical danger, not least because it may shed light on the internal operation of drug cartels and their connection to the powers that be. Yet there exist a number of studies that offer a good perspective on the cannabis production and trade in their local and global dimensions (for example, see Bloomer, 2009; Chouvy & Laniel, 2004; Kepe, 2003). Woven together, they bring to light the variants of the cannabis value chain and reveal their shared characteristics. Over the past year H el ene Servel, a French student studying at the Universit e Lyon-2 and I have strived to unravel the political ecology of hashish (cannabis resin) in the Bek aa region of Lebanon. Our findings are currently being prepared for publication, but a cursory examination of the data allowed us to identify a number of themes that echo the reports from other cannabis-producing regions of the South.

Contrary to a commonly held idea, most small farmers, especially subsistence farmers, who engage in the production of cannabis are not bandits who like to live in illegality. To them, cannabis farming is a coping mechanism that offers an economically viable alternative to legal crops that have little return on investment. It is also often part of a diversified livelihood portfolio that includes on-farm and off-farm employment (Bloomer, 2009). Even landless farmworkers benefit from cannabis production, as daily wages can be up to 10 times higher than the average farmworker’s pay (see Cochet, 1989, for Mexico). That said, cannabis farming may also be thought of as an act of contestation directed at a state that does not offer social support to its marginalized citizens and which those citizens see as being responsible for

their destitution. This thesis is well developed in James C. Scott’s theory of “everyday form of peasant resistance” (Scott, 1986).

Another common misconception is that all cannabis producers are rich. While the returns from cannabis cultivation are higher than “legal” crops, one must note that the distribution of profits and earnings reflects the strong power differential along the production and marketing chain. As with

regular crops, small farmers — who produce most of the raw material — are at the bottom of the pile and obtain the smallest share of revenues. Traders, smugglers, and large producers who control the subsequent stages of the value chain are the largest earners. In spite of that, it is the cannabis farmers who are the target of repression. Poret (2006) analyzed the drug-prohibition policies of the United Nations

and shows that they almost exclusively address the supply side, which is made up essentially of small producers. These policies push them to seek refuge under the wings of powerful players who practice a blend of business and banditry. Thus, land, labor, and financial capitals are not sufficient to guarantee success in cannabis production. The other two essential elements are the ability to take risk, as farmers operate with a constant sword of Damocles looming over their heads, and the availability of a strong, protective “social” capital that offers collective protection from the repressive apparatus.

For some researchers (Chouvy & Laniel, 2004) the dynamics of the cannabis value chain are essentially driven by geopolitical considerations. Much has been said about the U.S. use of the “War on Terror” and the “War on Drugs” (Carpenter, 2004; Greenwald, 2010) to justify its self-appointment as the global Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), operating and funding cannabis eradication programs worldwide (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2013). No amount of scaremongering, however, can shake away the widespread conviction among cannabis growers in Lebanon that the U.S. has a

**To subsistence farmers,
cannabis farming is a coping
mechanism that offers an
economically viable alternative
to legal crops that have little
return on investment.**

hidden agenda that goes well beyond the protection of its people from the nefarious effects of narcotics. They point to the flagrant contradiction in the U.S. between the legalization of cannabis production and the emergence of quasi-industrial production units, and the financial support for the eradication of cannabis fields where it contributes to local livelihoods. In that respect, planting cannabis becomes not only a livelihood necessity, but also an act of resistance to what is perceived as an iniquitous and hegemonic power.

These specificities set aside, it appears that cannabis production abides by the same economic principles as any other commodity traded in capitalist markets. Its production requires labor and capital investments, and its pricing obeys the law of supply and demand. It is channeled through an economic value chain that is just as implacable. The only reason its cultivation is still profitable for small farmers in the South is its illegality: it does not have to compete yet with industrially farmed agricultural commodities that have benefited from direct or indirect farm subsidies. But this is rapidly changing. As the U.S. legalizes production and the new pot barons (Newsweek, 2012; Fortune, 2013) find their places in Wall Street offices, many Southern countries such as Uruguay are starting to follow suit in order to carve themselves a share of a promising global market.

One cannot help wonder about the fate of the small farmers as cannabis enters the global commodities regime. Will legalizing production benefit them by removing the sword of Damocles under which they operate and freeing them from the hold of cartels? Some small cannabis farmers are concerned that legalization will invite “safe” capital investments by large corporations and that they will lose the only edge they now possess: their willingness to take risks. For regions such as the Moroccan Rif or the Lebanese Bekáa, and in the absence of any viable alternatives, these changes are bound to cause further depeasantization and to deepen poverty. Small producers sought refuge in

illegality as they gave up on governments that have been incapable of offering support to their citizenry, and after having witnessed the repeated failure of crop replacement programs. The legalization process may now breach this last line of defense. These presumptions bring about an important question: Can small farmers exist within a legality that is imposed on them by a power architecture in which they do not participate? For those among us who are interested in political ecology and are concerned about the fate of small farmers, this new agrarian question must become an urgent research priority.

**Planting cannabis becomes
not only a livelihood necessity,
but also an act of resistance to
what is perceived as an
iniquitous and hegemonic power.**

References

- Bloomer, J. (2009). Using a political ecology framework to examine extra-legal livelihood strategies: A Lesotho-based case study of cultivation of and trade in cannabis. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 16, 49–69.
- Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. (2013). *2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2013/vol1/204050.htm>
- Carpenter, T. G. (2004). How the drug war in Afghanistan undermines America’s war on terror. Available at <http://www.cato.org/publications/foreign-policy-briefing/how-drug-war-afghanistan-undermines-americas-war-terror>
- Chouvy, P.-A., & Laniel, L. (2004). De la géopolitique des drogues illicites. *Hérodote*, 112, 7–26.
- Cochet, H. (1989). Cultures illicites et développement : Les producteurs de cannabis et d’opium au Mexique. *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Développement*, 24, 89–100.
- Fortune. (2013, April 8). Marijuana Inc. [Cover].
- Greenwald, G. (2010, October 14). The wars on drug and terror: Mirror images [Web log post]. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2010/10/14/wars_3/
- Kepe, T. (2003). *Cannabis sativa* and rural livelihoods in South Africa: Politics of cultivation, trade and value in Pondoland. *Development Southern Africa*, 20(5), 605–615. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0376835032000149252>

Martelli, S. (2013, May 29). High in the Rif, Morocco's kif culture thrives. *The (Lebanon) Daily Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Lifestyle/2013/May-29/218705-high-in-the-rif-morocco-kif-culture-thrives.ashx#axzz215GiIp8q>

Newsweek. (2012, October 29). The new pot barons [Cover].

Poret, S. (2006). Vers une analyse économique des politiques publiques des drogues? *Revue Française d'Économie*, 20(4), 161–203.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3406/rfec.2006.1587>

Scott, J. C. (1986). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press.