



## GLOBAL VIEWS OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

*Reflections on the growing worldwide local food movement*

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### Occupy the global food regime

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There is a new Muppet on Sesame Street. She is named Lily and is sponsored by corporate giant Walmart.<sup>1</sup> Her job is to educate American children about hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity in the United States. I watched an episode on YouTube<sup>2</sup> and learned that in the U.S., 50 million children go to bed hungry 3 or 4 times a month, and that, according to the USDA, 17 million children, or one in every four American kids under age 6, are affected by hunger and malnutrition. That this should happen in the country that is the world's largest food producer and the world's largest food exporter is undisputable evidence of the insanity of the current food regime.

That food regime was born sometime during the mid-twentieth century, when the Global South

became the main recipient of food surpluses produced from Northern industrialized agriculture. Local food systems were destroyed in the process, and so was smallholder agriculture. The Green Revolution brought increases in yield in the South, associated with tremendous social disruptions and reliance on imported farm inputs produced by Northern corporations. A new capitalist, export-based agriculture flourished in some parts of the South, favoring traders and financiers, while basic food commodities and processed foods continued to be imported from the North. In the late 20th century, private corporations strengthened their hold on the global food regime. Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) describe it as being based on the

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<sup>1</sup> Walmart. (2011, October 4). Brad Paisley, Kimberly Williams Paisley and the Sesame Street Muppets help families cope with hunger. Retrieved from <http://walmartstores.com/pressroom/news/10729.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> WIVBTV. (2011, October 5). Sesame St. Muppet will highlight hunger. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxaI4ea58mA&feature=related>

“unregulated expansion of global markets...a belief that methods drawn from business can solve social problems” (2011, p. 119). They further contend that “the regime is firmly held in place by Northern-dominated international finance and development institutions (e. g. Cargill, Monsanto, ADM, Tyson, Carrefour, Tesco, Walmart), agricultural policies of the G-8 (US Farm Bill, EU’s Common Agricultural Policy) and big philanthropy capital (e.g., The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)” (Holt-Gimenez, 2011, p. 119).

The unregulated expansion of global markets, which is a main attribute of the global food regime, was at the core of the food crisis of 2008, in which speculations by companies that dominate the corporate food regime were a major cause of the spike in food prices that caused millions to fall into malnutrition. If the globalized and corporatized food regime leaves millions of U.S. children hungry at bedtime while grain silos are overflowing, imagine what it can do in countries of the South that are plagued with shaky economies, chronic poverty, and corrupt governments. Take for example Ethiopia, one of the most food-insecure countries in the world.

A recent study completed by risk analysis and mapping consultants Maplecroft found Ethiopia to be the seventh most food-insecure country out of 196, not far behind Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study used the FAO 12 key determinants of food security to determine the Food Security Risk Index (FSRI). These determinants include availability of food, access to food, and stability of food supplies at national and regional levels, as well as population health status. Droughts and conflicts were listed as major causes of food insecurity, but these were, according to Maplecroft, “compounded by human factors which have the greatest effects on the most vulnerable

populations. These include volatility in the commodity market relating to speculation by bank and hedge funds and the increased use of biofuels in the developed world, both of which have contributed to spikes in cereals and vegetable oil prices” (Maplecroft, 2011, “Global food stocks ‘alarmingly’ low,” para. 4). This is especially alarming as the markets continue to be totally deregulated and the United States moves further into the production of inedible genetically modified corn destined for ethanol production (Goldberg, 2011).

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But speculation by banks and hedge funds do not only artificially raise food prices; they also drive large-scale investments aimed at the production of tradable food commodities. Land grabbing, or what is euphemistically called “international investments in agriculture,” has spread like the plague in

Asia and Africa. Investors trying to make a profit from the spike in food commodities are rushing to acquire enormous swathes of land to practice intensive and export-oriented agricultural production. As a result, small farmers from many countries of the Global South are being driven off their land and made even more food insecure. Investors implicated in land grabbing include states such as China and Saudi Arabia, commodity trading companies such as Cargill, and also, some reports suggest, prestigious U.S. universities through their endowment funds (Vatsal, 2011), and even some philanthropic foundations like the Walmart Foundation, which has reportedly set aside US\$1 billion to invest in agriculture in Africa (Baxter, 2011). Ethiopia also suffers most from land grabbing. Much has been published about the issue, but a recent book by Aklog Birara entitled *Ethiopia: The Great Land Giveaway* fully documents this phenomenon and sheds light on the ruthlessness of a global food regime in which food can be produced and exported from the very

nations that suffer from endemic malnutrition and recurring famines.

The absurdity that can result from such export-driven agricultural investments is exemplified in a new wine production project implemented in Ethiopia's fertile Rift Valley in partnership with the French company Castel. In a recent article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the head of sales at Castel was quoted as saying, "If our wine can contribute to improving this country's image, we'll have succeeded" (Lepidi, 2011, para. 4). Surely those dying from hunger in Ethiopia will be comforted at the thought that someone is thinking positively about their country while sipping Rift Valley chardonnay.

The injustice and indecency of the global food regime has been exposed time after time. Yet it continues to dominate our lives — and our land. Many are calling for its reform, especially in the institutions that are closest to the centers of power. Others contend that reforms today will only serve as temporary measures and that the food regime cannot be dissociated from the global economic regime. Some things are sure: discontent is rife and voices are rising across the world, from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, demanding a complete overhaul of the system. But it looks like it will take more than Muppet Lily to convince them otherwise, even if it is sponsored by the Walmart Foundation.



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