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GLOBAL VIEWS OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Reflections on the growing worldwide local food movement

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Bread, freedom, and social justice

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Anyone needing an indication of how much the Arab World has changed in the past year has only to tune in to one of the popular satellite TV music channels. There, young artist Ramy Essam's hit song "Bread, Freedom and Social Justice" is beamed several times a day to the four corners of the Arab world. The song was released last year, in the wake of the Egyptian uprising that brought down a regime that punished talk about freedom and social justice with imprisonment and torture. It takes its title from one of the most popular slogans chanted during the 2011 protests, which came after bread riots had shaken Egypt and many surrounding Arab countries in the wake of the 2008 food crisis. In that sense, the song adequately summarizes the main demands of the Arab people. Food security is at the top of that list.

The Arab region is the most food-insecure part of the world. It imports 50% of the calories it consumes (The World Bank, FAO and IFAD, 2006), and local food production is limited by serious ecological and structural conditions. Egypt is the largest single grain importer in the world (FAO, 2011), and other countries in what was historically known as the Fertile Crescent (parts of present day Iraq, southern Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine) suffer from the same predicament. This is one of the main reasons why many researchers from around the world have sought to attribute the Arab uprisings to rising food prices (see for example Bar-Yam, 2012 and Harrigan, 2012). The food price spikes since 2008 have certainly served to mobilize public anger, but people have risen up for many different reasons. Among these are youth unemployment and rural poverty associated with the demise of local food systems. All these are important components of food security.

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To the interested onlooker, the problem of food security in the Arab world appears to be inextricable: the region's ecological endowment is simply not sufficient to satisfy the needs of a population that has been experiencing the fastest growth rates worldwide and the most rapid urbanization (IFPRI, 2010). Moreover, crop productivity is low (except in Egypt) and the spread of technology is limited by rural illiteracy and poor standards of education. The natural conclusion is usually that the region must rely principally on global trade in order to satisfy the needs of its growing population. But markets are only open to those who can afford them. That is why mainstream institutions such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) (Breisinger et al., 2010) classifies oil-rich countries such as Qatar as food secure although Qatar produces no food, while the Arab countries of the Levant — where farming began 10,000 years ago — are considered to be food insecure because they do not produce sufficient oil rent to afford to import all the food they need.

A solution to the Arab food security riddle must definitely have a homegrown component, especially in those countries where great human civilizations were built on surplus created from agriculture.

The instability of the world food markets has clearly shown that reliance on trade for food security is a very risky enterprise, and that the globalized food regime does not believe in charity. A solution to the Arab food security riddle must definitely have a homegrown component, especially in those countries where great human civilizations were built on surplus created from agriculture. The Nile basin was the cradle of the Pharaohs, and Babylon rose from the rich Mesopotamian plains. Why are these regions unable to cater better to their own needs? Why can't they contribute more prominently to their own food security?

The answer to this conundrum lies first in a better understanding of the contemporary rural and farming history of the region, which, half a century ago, moved from the yoke of colonialism to the grasp of autocracies in a world system where strategic interest in oil reserves are the prime determinant of foreign policy. Since the mid–twentieth century, the region has had more than its share of invasions, occupations, and wars, and the need to keep a tight control over the region has led the dominant nations to embrace and foster local dictatorships. With generous military help, these totalitarian regimes developed competencies in oppression and repression, but not in farming and rural development. As a result, local food systems were quasi-annihilated and rural poverty became rampant. Today, while 43% of the Arab population still lives in rural areas, 70% of them are poor (Riadh, 2010). A small affluent class has taken hold of the resources of these nations, strengthened by its close association with the regimes to whom it acts as a financial intermediary. Investments in agriculture have been largely capitalistic in nature. Strengthened with state subsidies, investors have aimed at producing value-added goods for export rather than addressing the food and nutritional needs of the population. Meanwhile, this same class also doubled up as trade agents for multinational corporations flooding local markets with once cheap subsidized food from Northern surpluses. It is in this context that Arab food security needs to be perceived.

Fair access to land is a precondition to the growth and prosperity of a local food system that contributes to food security and sovereignty and alleviates rural poverty. Access to adequate land resources remains one of the most challenging hurdles facing Arab family farmers, who are the backbone of the local food systems. In many Arab countries, the endowment of fertile land is limited by natural conditions: a mixture of terrain and water availability. In Egypt, for instance, the farmland area per capita is just one twenty-fifth of a hectare (0.1 acre). Those in power hold much of this land according to the GINI index for land, a measure of the inequality in distribution (where 0 is perfect equality

and 100 is perfect inequality). In this region, the GINI index is among the highest worldwide. In Egypt it is 69, in Jordan it is 81, in Lebanon it is 69, in Morocco 62, in Tunisia 69, and in Algeria 65 (FAO, 2010). (It is unavailable for Yemen, Syria, Libya, Bahrain, and other Gulf countries.) Few countries in the world show higher land inequality figures as a group, except perhaps the U.S., where the GINI for land is 78. By comparison, Ireland is 44 and Sweden is 32 (FAO, 2010).

The Arab popular uprisings have proved that people can remove dictators from power. But a difficult question remains: Will the Arab people be able to change their social and economic realities, ameliorate the living conditions of the poor, improve food security, and achieve the social justice called for in Ramy's song?

Current indications are not very encouraging. Media reports indicate that public feeling on the Tunisian streets is that there has been no real change in the countryside, where the uprising began. This is despite the fact that the agriculture sector provides more than 12% of the Tunisian GDP and continues to attract foreign investments (Larbi & Chymes, 2009). Statistics also show that agricultural exports rose by 12% after the revolution (Shahin, 2011). However, none of these achievements was used to improve the livelihoods of small producers and of agricultural workers. They also did not lower unemployment, rife in the countryside.

The problem lies in great part in the economic model followed by Arab countries, which has not been seriously challenged by the uprisings. This model depends on economic growth based on the maximum exploitation of human and natural resources. Wealth continues to be concentrated in the hands of a small group of affluent people that influences national policy to protect its members' interests. For instance, the land rent "liberation" Law 96 of 1992, which forced more than a million Egyptian farmers off their land, has not been revoked — and there are no indications that it will be (Bush, 2010).

Many today feel that no regime change will truly take place if this system is not confronted. There are, however, some positive trends that lead us to cautious optimism. In Egypt, a popular movement has recently emerged in the countryside, where 18 million farmers live. It seeks to lobby for the inclusion of farmers' rights to land, water, and a decent living in the new constitution. Whether movements such as these will gain enough power to change the established order may be decisive in achieving bread, freedom, and social justice.

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