
Sustaining Localisation

Throughout the world, agriculture is in crisis. Farmers are going bankrupt while international trade in food is booming. Every year, the distance between producers and consumers rises, to the point where the average American meal has now traveled more than 1,500 miles before it arrives on the dinner table. Is there an antidote to this spreading agri-sickness?

Globalisation of the food economy enriches a small number of agri-'businesses'.

In India we have the phenomenon where the state's granaries are spilling over, while at the same time there are starvation deaths! And as the WTO rules come into force the situation is getting worse...

These trends are directly linked to each other.

Helena Norberg-Hodge and Steven Gorelick give an overview of the political economy of localising food in their article - Bringing the Food Economy Home.

Today, roughly half the world's people, mostly in the South, still derive a large proportion of their needs from local economies. What can globalisation offer this majority, other than unrealistic promises? Localisation not only entails far less social and environmental upheaval, it is actually far less costly to implement. In fact, every step towards the local, whether at the policy level or in our communities, brings with it a whole cascade of benefits.

Bringing the Food Economy Home, by Helena Norberg-Hodge and Steven Gorelick. International Society for Ecology and Culture, UK, <http://www.isec.org.uk/articles/bringing.html>. [C.ELDOC6006689]

'Paryavarana Parasa', an invitation to Dharti Utsav, The Timbaktu Collective, June 2003 [C.ELDOC6007775]

'Community Grain Bank: An Alternative Public Distribution System' in Institutional Development in Social Interventions by Vijay Padaki and Manjulika Vaz. Sage, New Delhi, 2003. [B.Q80.P60]

Bringing the Food Economy Home

Hodge and Steven Gorelick

Localisation is essentially a process of de-centralisation - shifting economic activity into the hands of millions of small- and medium-sized businesses instead of concentrating it in fewer and fewer mega-corporations. Localisation doesn't mean that every community would be entirely self-reliant; it simply means striking a balance between trade and local production by diversifying economic activity and shortening the distance between producers and consumers wherever possible.

Where should the first steps towards localisation take place? Since food is something everyone, everywhere, needs every day, a shift from global food to local food would have the greatest impact of all.

What is 'global food'?

Global food is based on an economic theory which says that instead of producing a diverse range of food crops, every nation and region should specialise in one or two globally-traded commodities, which they can produce cheaply enough to compete with every other producer. The proceeds from exporting those commodities are then used to buy food for local consumption. According to this theory, everyone will benefit.

The theory, as it turns out, is wrong. Rather than providing universal benefits, the global food system has been a major cause of hunger and environmental destruction around the world.

The environment has been hit particularly hard. The global system demands centralised collection of tremendous quantities of single crops, leading to the creation of huge monocultures. Monocultures, in turn, require massive inputs of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilisers. These practices systematically eliminate biodiversity from farmland, and lead to soil erosion, eutrophication of waterways, and the poisoning of surrounding ecosystems.

Since global food is destined for distant markets, food miles have gone up astronomically, making food transport a major contributor to fossil fuel use, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Social and economic costs

As farms have become larger and more mechanised, the number of farmers has steadily declined. Further, most of what we spend on food goes to the middlemen, not farmers. In the US, for example, distributors, marketers, and input suppliers take 91 cents out of every food dollar, while farmers keep only 9 cents. As global corporations take over food marketing, small shopkeepers are also being squeezed out.

In the South, the globalisation of food is driving literally millions of farming families from the land. Dolma Tsering, a farmer in Northern India, described what has happened in her village: "Whole families used to work on the land. We grew almost everything we needed. Now imported wheat is destroying our market. It's just not worth going to the trouble of producing food anymore, and the village is being emptied of people." Throughout the South, most of those displaced people will end up in urban slums - without community, without connection to the land, without a secure and healthy food supply.

The declining quality of food

Because of the global food system, people around the world are induced to eat largely the same foods. In this way, farm monocultures go hand in hand with a spreading human monoculture, in which people's tastes and habits are homogenised in part through advertising, which promotes foods suited to monocultural production, mechanised harvesting, long-distance transport and long-term storage. New additives and processes like UHT milk are continually developed to extend storage time.

For harried consumers, food corporations also provide 'convenience' foods that can be re-heated quickly in a microwave, and even items like 'macaroni and cheese on a stick', which can be eaten with one hand. Nutritional content? We're told not to worry, since some of the nutrients destroyed in processing can supposedly be reinserted. Flavour? Hundreds of additives are on hand to mimic the taste and texture of real food. Food quality? With producers in a competitive race to the bottom, it's not surprising that food

poisoning cases are steadily increasing, and new diseases like BSE have appeared.

Decades of government support for global trade have concentrated wealth and power in ever larger corporations, which increasingly dominate every aspect of the global food supply - from seed and feed to everything on supermarket shelves. Today just two companies, Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, control 70 to 80 percent of the world's grain trade. One agribusiness, Philip Morris, gets ten cents out of every American food dollar - more than that earned by all US farmers combined.

Benefits of the local

Local food is, simply, food produced for local and regional consumption. For that reason, 'food miles' are relatively small, which greatly reduces fossil fuel use and pollution. There are other environmental benefits as well. While global markets demand monocultural production, local markets give farmers an incentive to diversify. Diversified farms cannot accommodate the heavy machinery used in monocultures. Diversification also lends itself to organic methods since crops are far less susceptible to pest infestations.

Local food systems have economic benefits. Most of the money spent on food goes to the farmer, not corporate middlemen. Juan Moreno, a farmer in the Andalusian region of Spain, told us, "When we used to sell our vegetables to supermarkets we got almost nothing for them. Now, through the local co-op, we're getting much more - three times as much for some vegetables."

Small diversified farms can help reinvigorate entire rural economies, since they employ far more people per acre than large monocultures. In the UK, farms under 100 acres provide five times more jobs per acre than those over 500 acres. Moreover, money paid as wages to farm workers benefit local economies far more than the money paid for heavy equipment and the fuel to run it.

Food quality

Local food is usually far fresher - and therefore more nutritious - than global food. It also needs fewer preservatives or other additives, and organic methods can eliminate pesticide residues. Farmers can grow varieties that are best suited to local climate and soils, allowing flavour and nutrition to take

precedence over transportability, shelf life and the whims of global markets. Animal husbandry can be integrated with crop production, providing healthier, more humane conditions for animals and a non-chemical source of fertility.

Even food security would increase if people depended more on local foods. Instead of being concentrated in a handful of corporations, control over food would be dispersed and decentralised.



More Food, Low Cost?

Many believe that the global food system is necessary because it produces more food and delivers it at a lower price. In reality, however, the global food system is neither more productive than local systems nor is it really cheaper. Studies carried out all over the world show that small-scale, diversified farms have a higher total output per unit of land than large-scale monocultures.

Global food is also very costly, though most of those costs do not show up in its supermarket price. Instead, a large portion of what we pay for global food comes out of our taxes - to fund research into pesticides and biotech, to subsidise the transport, communications and energy infrastructures the system requires, and to pay for the foreign aid that pulls Third World economies into the destructive global system. We pay in other ways for the environmental costs of global food, which are degrading the planet our children will inherit.

How do we go local?

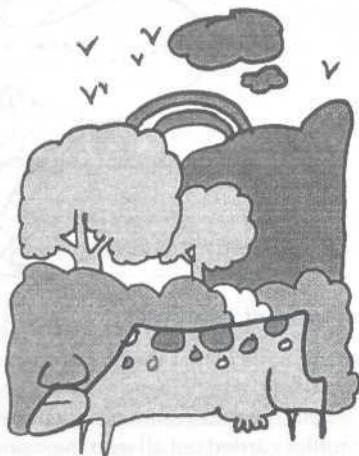
Local food systems have immense advantages, but most policymakers - in the belief that more trade is always better - systematically support the further globalisation of food. As a result, identical products are criss-crossing the globe, with no other purpose than enriching the corporate middlemen that control the global food supply.

An immediate first step would be to press for policy changes to insure that identical products are not being both imported and exported. If we eliminate needless trade in everything from wheat, milk and potatoes to apple juice and live animals, the reduction in transport alone would bring immediate benefits. What's more, if people around the world were allowed to eat their own bread and drink their own milk, giant corporations wouldn't profit every time we sit down to eat.

Such a step would require a rethinking of 'free trade' dogma. Trade treaties need to be rewritten, reestablishing the rights of citizens to protect their economies and resources from corporate predators.

At the same time, subsidies that now support the global food system need to be shifted towards more localised systems. Governments have spent tremendous sums of taxpayers' money to prop up a costly food system which pretends to provide 'cheap' food. If even a fraction of that sum were devoted to supporting local food systems instead, the cost of local food would decrease substantially, and its availability rapidly grow.

Shifts in energy policy - which now heavily subsidise the large-scale centralised energy systems needed for global trade and industrial 'development' of all kinds - are critically important. In the South, where the energy infrastructure is still being built up, a shift towards a decentralised renewable energy path could be easily implemented, at a fraction of the cost



in dollars and human upheaval that huge dams, nuclear power and fossil fuels entail.

We also need to recognise the importance of local knowledge to maintain existing local food systems, and to reclaim those that have been largely lost. Today, a one-size-fits-all educational model is being imposed worldwide, eliminating much of the knowledge and skills people need to live on their own resources, in their own places on the earth.

Changes in tax policy would also help to promote food localisation. Now, tax credits for capital- and energy-intensive technologies favour the largest and most global producers. Meanwhile the more labour-intensive methods of small-scale diversified producers are penalised through income taxes, payroll taxes and other taxes on labour.

Re-regulating Global Trade, Deregulating Local Trade

As we've seen, the steady deregulation of global trade and finance has led to the emergence of giant corporations whose activities are highly polluting and socially exploitative. This in turn has created a need for ever more social and environmental regulations, along with a massive bureaucracy to administer them. That bureaucracy is strangling smaller businesses with paperwork, inspections, fines, and the cost of mandated technologies. The regulatory burden is too great for the small to bear, while the big happily pay up and grow bigger as their smaller competitors die out. How many dairies have gone out of business because they had to have stainless steel sinks, when porcelain had served them well for generations?

Today, there is an urgent need to re-regulate global trade, by allowing national and regional governments to control the activities of TNCs. At the same time, there is an equally urgent need to de-regulate local trade, which by its nature is far less likely to damage human health and the environment.

Turning the tide

These policy and regulatory shifts would open up space for thousands of community-based initiatives - many of them already underway - to flourish. From CSAs and box schemes to farmers' markets, food co-ops, and buy-local campaigns, people have already begun the hands-on work needed to rebuild

their local food systems. But these efforts will fall short if government policies continue to tilt the playing field towards the large and global.

When government ministers blindly promote trade for the sake of trade while at the same time discussing reductions in CO2 emissions, the possibility of sensible policy shifts can seem remote. And so it is, unless activists and other citizens unite behind the anti-global and pro-local banners, and exert powerful pressure from below. Already, unprecedented alliances have been created. Environmentalists and labour unionists, farmers and deep ecologists, people from North and South - are all linking hands to say 'no' to an economic steamroller that destroys jobs as quickly as it destroys species, that threatens the livelihood of farmers while driving up the price of healthy food in the marketplace.

Still more work is needed, however, including education campaigns to reveal the connections between our many crises, to spell out the truth about trade and the way we measure progress, and to graphically describe the ecological, social, psychological and economic benefits of localising and decentralising our economies.

Shortening the links between farmers and consumers may be one of the most strategic and enjoyable ways to bring about fundamental change for the better. How satisfying it is to know that by taking a step which is so good for us and our families, we are also making a very real contribution to preserving diversity, protecting jobs and rural livelihoods and the environment, all over the world. ▶

In India, many groups have started reviving the notion among the community to grow local varieties, organically, and for local consumption, to beat this cycle. From the semi-arid deccan region, we have the examples of the Paryavaran Parsa, a celebration of local diversity and enduring tradition, and Community Grain Banks, an initiative among women and dalits. These are but two of the scores and hundreds of such initiatives that presage an essential step that will make another world possible.



Paryavarana Parasa (Environmental Festival)

(Adapted from an invitation to the Dharti Utsav facilitated each year by The Timbaktu Collective in the Rayalseema area of Andhra Pradesh)

This is a celebration of the commons and the common peoples of our land of Forest dwellers, Farmers, Fisher folk and Healers

This is a celebration of how two thirds of our population meet their survival needs and help the rest of the nation survive

This is a celebration of the commons and the rich and abundant biodiversity of Agriculture, Artisanry and Forests

This is a celebration of all the commons and the wisdoms on nurturing nature and nature of healing, growing, living and reciprocating.

This is an assertion of the rights which predate that very word!

The Timbaktu Collective has been striving to rejuvenate and regenerate the natural resources and the traditional genetic base of this area and to revitalise the Traditional Art forms – all three being in a state of degradation. The Collective along with a number of local Panchayats and peoples organisations celebrate every Environment day, as “Paryavarana Parasa” (Environment festival).

The intention is to provide understanding and inspiration to the common people to regain control over their natural resources and their traditional genetic base in order to combat drought and continue to live a sustainable agricultural lifestyle.

The Exhibition & Food stalls have

☞ Traditional seeds - both crops and indigenous tree and bush seeds are being collected from the local farmers and forests. Proper documentation is being done so that we will be able to display the history of all the seeds collected. Seeds will also be made available for sale. In an attached space, Mr. Narayan Reddy, a well-known organic farmer, will conduct four workshops through the two days for interested farmers;

- ☞ Traditional tools - tools used traditionally in household chores, agriculture, fishing and traditional hunting are being collected for display;
- ☞ Traditional herbal remedies - local mendicants have been contacted and they will display a number of herbs, roots, leaves and flowers, with charts explaining methods of preparing medicines and emphasizing certain diseases that are widely prevalent in the region. The mendicants will also be available for consultations.

To us this is another social forum, a bio-regional one. ▶

'Community Grain Banks : An Alternative Public Distribution System'

by Vijay Padaki and Manjulika Vaz

Zaheerabad in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh is a dry region in the Deccan. Traditionally, farmers in the region practiced rainfed agriculture and the main crop was jowar (sorghum) interspersed with some pulses and some greens. Recently, many of the rich landowners shifted to monocropping, preferring to grow cash crops. The poorer and smaller landowners as well as the landless were wage labourers on the large farms. They paid very little attention to their own few acres of land. They were highly dependent on the landlords for both wage earnings as well as food security. The shift to cash crops resulted in less employment, more land left fallow, degradation of cultivated land due to ecologically unsound practices, and threatened food security for the poor.

The Deccan Development Society (DDS) initiated programmes to develop the neglected land of the small / marginal farmers. The programme was initiated through village level organizations of women (*sangams*) from the marginalized communities. They carried out earthworks (such as bunding, water harvesting etc.) to break in this almost barren land. They also encouraged employment of people on their own land. Most important they revived traditional multi-cropping practices, which included legumes. This helped the refertilization of soil. The impact of all this was manifold:

- ▶ Regeneration of the land which led to a three-fold increase in its productivity.
- ▶ People regained confidence in the worth of their efforts.
- ▶ There were increased earnings per household.
- ▶ There was improved food security for every household.

This overall improved situation encouraged the sangam women to put more land under cultivation. In the late '80s they negotiated collective leasing of cultivable fallow lands from the larger, richer and mostly absentee landowners. DDS helped with a loan for the lease money. The crop-raising tasks were shared and managed by *sangam* women themselves. The programme led to changes in the social organization of farming, including the social status traditionally associated with farming. It was acknowledged that there was a shift - from men to women engaged in farming, from higher caste groups to dalits taking the lead.

A Setback

All this effort received a great setback in the early '90s from a statewide politically initiated programme introducing rice through the Public Distribution System at Rs.2 per kilogram. What was the need now for farmers to till their own lands, expend time, energy and resources when there was such an easy, cheap and attractive substitute? This step was hugely detrimental for the local region on many counts - agricultural, ecological, nutritional and cultural.

- ▶ Rice is produced in resource-rich irrigated belts at a distance from this region, thus supporting the big farmers, the transport lobbies and the nexus of middlemen.
- ▶ Rice is culturally alien, and not part of the daily diet. It is also a 'seductive' cereal, white, shiny, easy to cook, requiring no processing. The real problem, however, is that in comparison with the traditional staple diet of coarse grains rice is very low in nutritional value, if it is not complemented adequately with pulses, millets and beans.

A Return To Local Alternatives

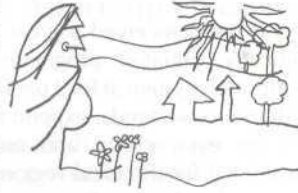
It took a few years for the women of Zaheerabad to see the damaging impact of rice on their lives. Among other things, their families felt weaker, they were getting anaemic, and were not strong enough to do their hard jobs. The *sangam* women deliberated over these issues during their meetings. DDS animators facilitated the thinking with information on the situation - almost 100,000 hectares of land had been left fallow as a direct result of the PDS rice scheme. About half a million woman-days of wages were being lost. Fodder for their cattle, fencing material for their field and roofing for their houses was reduced. There was quite some pressure to get the Rs.75 per month to purchase the PDS rations which would come to the village for only two days.

The women knew that they had to reclaim their fallows, work on regenerating it, and produce their traditional grains. This is when the idea of not only producing but also collectively storing and distributing the local produce was born.

It started off as an experimental project in one village in 1993. They needed finance of Rs.2500 per acre. No bank would offer them a loan for a dryland crop. They approached the Ministry of Rural Development through DDS with a project proposal for an alternative PDS through a Community Grain Fund. That was in 1994.

In each village the women identified 100 acres of fallow land belonging mostly to marginal farmers. The modalities of the project were worked out

with the farmers as project partners. The required money was advanced over a three year period to the farmers for ploughing, manuring, sowing and weeding in a timely manner. The money was to be repaid in the form of grain. Rates were fixed in advance for the grain to be repaid over the three years, thus avoiding the influence of market fluctuations.



Repayment schedules were worked out, and formal agreements were drawn up and signed. Committees of women were set up to look after all the activities of the project in each village. In turn they selected about 20 acres each, which they supervised personally. The women became the managers of the scheme, and handled complex management tasks.

Operations

The grain was collected by the village committees. This constituted the Village Grain Bank. The collection is done in a decentralized way. (Storage of sorghum in bulk is difficult.) Natural and indigenous storage and pest control methods were employed.

The next step in the system was a method of grain distribution. An innovative democratic process was followed to arrive at a wealth ranking within the community. The objective was for the grain bank to cater differentially to the needs of the poorer families. The criteria for assessing rural poverty were evolved in a participatory exercise by the villagers themselves. An assessment of every household in the village was done on a five-point scale. Each level of ranking was identified with a different colour. In the large village map drawn up, each house was marked in a specific colour after much deliberation. The households selected for grain distribution at the end of this open and transparent process received a sorghum card from the sangam with the colour coding for the ranking clearly indicated.

The card entitled the household to 25 kilograms of sorghum per month at a subsidized price of around Rs.2 per kilogram for six months starting from the rainy season. This is when wage earnings are low and food is scarce. The proceeds from the sale of the grain were deposited in a bank as the **Community Grain Fund**, which goes towards reclaiming more fallows, and extending the reach of the food security scheme. ▶

For more see : Food Security for Dryland Communities, By P V Satheesh, Director, Deccan Development Society. http://www.ddsindia.com/foodsec_dryland.htm [C.ELDOC6007488]