

The Case for Local Food

By Helena Norberg-Hodge

If you want to create a more sustainable society, a good place to start is by helping to rebuild your local food economy: food is something everyone, everywhere, needs every day, which means that even relatively small changes in the way it is produced and marketed can have immense effects. And since eating is a natural part of daily life, we all have frequent opportunities to make a difference.

Strengthening local food economies around the world would protect small farms, businesses, and local jobs; it would allow food to be produced in ways that nurture rather than destroy the land; and it would provide everyone with enough to eat — food that is as healthy and nutritious as possible.

Rebuilding local food economies means, most of all, shortening the distance food travels from the farm to table. This doesn't mean putting an end to all trade in food, or doing without oranges and bananas in cold climates. It simply means limiting the needless transport of food by trying to meet as many of our basic needs as possible, closer to home.

Many urbanised people have lost touch with the sources of their food, and may not realize that the distance their food travels has been steadily increasing. In the US, the average pound of food now travels 1,500 miles before it reaches the dinner table, and the distance continues to grow.



Much of this transport is needless: every day, identical commodities pass in opposite directions, criss-crossing the globe. The 'logic' of the global economy leads the US and other nations to import hundreds of thousands of tons of staple foods each year, while simultaneously exporting roughly the same amount. In an era of dwindling fossil fuel reserves and rising CO2 emissions, this is both senseless and wasteful. But it is a trend that is accelerating as governments systematically promote a single, globalized food system.

Within that food system, farming is merely an industry, and food just another commodity. A misplaced emphasis on 'efficiency' leads crops to be grown on huge farms specializing in one crop, while animals are raised by the millions in closely confined conditions on factory farms. Along with the needless transport of food, the use of heavy equipment, toxic agrochemicals and genetically modified seeds takes a heavy toll on the environment, and belies any claim to efficiency.

These trends do not benefit farmers. 'Free trade' policies are forcing them to compete with farmers on the other side of the world, many of whom work for a pittance. At the same time, they are being squeezed between the huge agribusinesses that supply their inputs and those that buy their production. As a result, small farmers are going bankrupt all over the world, and rural communities are being drained of life. For US farmers, suicide is now the leading cause of death.



The quality of our food, meanwhile, is declining. Hormones and antibiotics are given to animals to make them grow rapidly, and to keep them alive under inhumane factory conditions. Heavily processed global foods have been so stripped of flavour and aroma that chemical compounds designed to fool our senses must be added. Still others are added as preservatives to artificially extend shelf life, and foods may be irradiated with the same end in mind. Already, roughly two-thirds of the products on US supermarket shelves contain genetically-modified ingredients.

Further globalizing and industrializing our food supply is foolhardy and reckless. More sensible by far would be to shift direction, and instead support more localized food production and marketing. Such a shift would bring immense benefits:

- Local food means fresher food, which in turn means healthier food. Fresh organic vegetables are on average ten times more nutritious than conventional supermarket vegetables.
- Marketing locally reduces the number of middlemen, and therefore increases farmers' incomes. It also helps to cut prices, giving even low-income groups access to fresh affordable food.
- Local food systems lead to stronger local economies by providing jobs, supporting local shops, and keeping money from being siphoned off by distant investors and corporations.
- Local food systems encourage farmers to diversify their production, thereby making it easier to farm organically. Intercropping and rotations can replace dangerous pesticides, while on-farm waste like manure and crop residues can replace chemical fertilizers.
- By reducing the need for expensive inputs, farm diversification keeps more money in farmers' pockets. And unlike monocultural farmers, those who diversify are less susceptible to heavy losses from pest infestations or abnormal weather conditions like droughts or unexpected frosts.
- Reliance on smaller farms increases overall productivity, since smaller farms are more productive per acre than larger farms. A shift towards smaller farms would thus provide more food, and better food security worldwide.
- Smaller-scale, diversified farms serving local markets also provide better conditions for farm animals than large factory farms. There is less crowding, less dependence on long-distance transport, and less need for antibiotics and other drugs.



How can a shift towards the local happen? It is important to realize that government policies now systematically promote the global food system, and those policies need to change. 'Free trade' treaties, subsidies for long distance transport, relaxed anti-trust laws, hidden export subsidies, and much more, all work to support global producers and marketers at the expense of smaller competitors. Shifts in policy alone, however, will not be enough. In addition, a multitude of small and local steps will be needed to re-create and nurture healthier food systems. And for several years now, people have been taking those steps, experimenting and succeeding with direct marketing systems, including farmers markets, consumer co-operatives, community farms, and CSAs.

Nonetheless, we in the North are a long way from re-establishing more localized food systems. It is helpful to keep in mind a tremendously hopeful point: even today, the majority of people in the world, mostly in the South, still live on the land, growing food for themselves, their families and their own communities.

It is important that we do what we can to ensure that the economic and social structures on which those rural people depend are not further undermined. Insisting that people in the poor parts of the world devote their labor and their best land to feeding us does not ultimately benefit them. Feeding ourselves as much as possible while assisting the people of the South to diversify their economies — enabling them to feed themselves before they think about feeding us — would be the equitable thing to do.



As things stand today, part of every dollar we spend on global food — and a sizeable portion of our tax dollars — pays for food transport, packaging, advertising, processing, artificial flavours, chemical preservatives and toxic agrochemicals, as well as research into still more industrial food technologies. In return we're getting poor quality food, a degraded environment and rural communities sapped of life. Is this how we want our money spent? If not, we should be resisting the further globalization of food by pressing for policy changes, and by buying local, organic foods whenever possible.