

Think Global... Eat Local

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Today's mounting social and ecological crises demand responses that are broad, deep, and strategic. Given the widespread destruction wrought by globalisation, it seems clear that the most powerful solutions will involve a fundamental change in direction - towards localizing rather than globalising economic activity. In fact, 'going local' may be the single most effective thing we can do.

Many people will find this claim exaggerated and unrealistic. But we have to ask ourselves whether it is realistic to continue pulling the entire global population into a single economy - one in which a small fraction of the population already uses the bulk of the world's resources. Today, roughly half the world's people, mostly in the South, still derive a large proportion of their needs from local economies. Do we really believe that those people's lives will be improved if we destroy these economies? What can globalisation offer the majority, other than unrealistic promises? Localisation would not only entail far less social and environmental upheaval, it would actually be far less costly to implement. In fact, every step towards the local, whether at the policy level or in our communities, would bring with it a whole cascade of benefits.

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: instead of producing a diverse range of food crops, every nation and region should specialise in one or two globally-traded commodities - those 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 the 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. In the US, for example, transporting food within the nation's borders accounts for over 20 percent of all commodity transport, and results in at least 120 million tonnes of CO2 emissions every year. In the UK, imports of food and animal feed require over 83 billion tonne-kms of transport, use 1.6 billion litres of fuel, and emit more than 4 million tonnes of CO2. Much of this transport is utterly needless, since the 'logic' of global trade leads countries to simultaneously import and export the same commodity.

Social and economic costs

As farms have become larger and more mechanised, the number of farmers has steadily declined. The six founding countries of Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) had 22 million farmers in 1957; today that number has fallen to about seven million. In the US, 6.8 million farms were in operation in 1935; today there are only one-fourth as many.

The global food system saps rural economies in other ways. People are generally unaware that most of what they spend on food goes to corporate 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 1990s alone, some 1,000 independent food shops - grocers, bakers, butchers and fishmongers - closed in the UK each year.

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 earned by all US farmers combined.

Benefits of the local

Awareness is steadily growing that global food is altogether too costly - socially, environmentally, even economically. People are beginning to seek out local food, and a whole movement is gaining ground.

But what, exactly, are 'local food systems'? If the highest expression of the global food system is a plastic-wrapped, highly processed slab of junk food that has been transported thousands of miles, the archetype product of a local food system is fresh food raised on nearby farms and sold at farmers' markets and in independent local shops.

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 - which systematically eliminates all but the cash crop from the land - local markets give farmers an incentive to diversify, which creates many niches on the farm for wild plant and animal species to occupy. Moreover, diversified farms cannot accommodate the heavy machinery used in

monocultures, thereby eliminating a major cause of soil erosion. Diversification also lends itself to organic methods, since crops are far less susceptible to pest infestations.

Local food systems have economic benefits, too, since most of the money spent on food goes to the farmer, not corporate middlemen. Juan Moreno, a farmer in the Andalucian 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, wages paid to farm workers benefit local economies and communities far more than money paid for heavy equipment and the fuel to run it: the latter is almost immediately siphoned off to equipment manufacturers and oil companies, while wages paid to workers are spent locally.

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. And if countries in the South were encouraged to use their labour and their best agricultural land for local needs rather than growing luxury crops for Northern markets, the rate of endemic hunger would diminish as well.

Nonetheless, even many of those who acknowledge its negative effects have been led to 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. In fact, if providing food for the world's hungry is the priority, then the shift towards local food systems should begin immediately, since they do a far better job of feeding people.

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.

When we buy local food, we can actually pay less because we are not paying for excessive transport, wasteful packaging, advertising, and chemical additives - only for fresh, healthy and nutritious food. Most of our food dollar isn't going to bloated corporate agribusinesses, but to nearby farmers and small shopkeepers, enabling them to charge less while still earning more than if they were tied to the global system.

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, re-establishing 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.