

Reclaiming Our Future: Reclaiming Our Food

by Helena Norberg-Hodge, ISEC Director

Paris in the 1970s was a city full of character and life. Each quartier had its own colourful market, selling wonderful fruits, all kinds of vegetables, meats, superb cheeses and wine. All of that diversity originated at no great distance: most of it came from different regions of France, if not from the immediate surroundings of Paris. Today it can be difficult to find garlic in Paris that has not travelled from China. In the supermarkets, grapes from Chile and wine from California are increasingly commonplace. The diversity of French foods is in decline, and those that are available are becoming more and more costly.

In the little villages of Southern Andalucia in the 1980s, almost all the food in the shops came from the villages themselves or the immediate region: goat cheeses, olives and olive oil, grapes, fresh and dried figs, wine and many different kinds of meat. Today you will find almost nothing that has been produced locally. The olives may have been grown in the surrounding region, but they have travelled to the metropolis to be packaged in plastic and then sent back again. Virtually everything sold is vacuum-sealed in layers of plastic. Even cheese rinds are now made of plastic.

In line with these trends, Britain will this year export 111 million litres of milk and 47 million kilograms of butter. Simultaneously, we will *import* 173 million litres of milk and 49 million kilograms of

butter. Apples will be flown 14,000 miles from New Zealand and green beans flown 4,000 miles from Kenya. We might wonder how these can possibly compete with local apples and beans: surely food produced locally should be cheaper. But it isn't. Generally speaking fresh local food is instead vastly more expensive than food from faraway. The main reason for this is government investments and subsidies.

Governments — that's you and me, the taxpayers — fund the motorways, high-speed rail links, tunnels, bridges and communications satellites that make the supermarkets' global trade possible. We also subsidise the aviation fuel and energy production on which supermarkets depend. And we help fund the research and advice for farmers geared toward biotechnology, mechanisation and intensive chemical use. Local traders, small-scale farmers, retailers and manufacturers pay the price through their taxes and also through being forced out of business.

Some people might argue that there is nothing wrong with such developments — that they are a sign of progress and the emergence of a global, cosmopolitan society based on the principle of choice. But the purported diversity offered by the global economy and its supermarkets is based on modes of production that are condemning producers to monoculture. The result is that day by day the diverse cheeses from France, the apple varieties of Devon and the olive groves of Andalucia are ripped out or replaced by standardised hybrids to suit the long distance, large scale marketplace. Small producers are being pushed out by the need to produce ever larger monocultures, with the mechanised production and high levels of

chemical inputs that this entails. And this in turn has negative repercussions for the entire rural economy.

Recently, citizen groups around the world have begun to realise that it is our highly centralised and subsidised economic system itself — rather than the inefficient management, or insufficient scale, of it — that is the prime culprit behind food shortages in the South and food scares like BSE, salmonella and GMOs in the North. Increasingly, grassroots movements are pressing for major policy changes at national and international levels in order to bring the global financial markets under control. They are also working, against the economic odds, to strengthen local economies. And of all the movements promoting localisation, probably the most successful is the local food movement.

Re-localising Food: It's Already Happening

For virtually the whole of human history most cultures have relied on food produced within reasonable distance. The logic is unassailable: locally grown food is fresher, and so tastier and more nutritious, than food transported over long distances. It is also likely to be healthier, because the producer knows the consumer, does not view him or her merely as a faceless 'target market', and so is less likely to take risks and liberties with preservatives and other artificial chemicals. Faced with a bland, globalised, food culture, people are beginning to realise the advantages of local food, and are working to rejuvenate markets for it.

In the UK, for example, the first farmers' market, set up in the city of Bath in 1997, was restricted to producers based within a 30-40 mile radius. Public interest in the Bath market was extraordinary, with over 400 callers ringing the market itself in the first few weeks, many of them asking for information on how similar initiatives might be set up in their own areas. Enthusiasm is so high that the Soil Association, which promotes organic farming in the UK, is now offering one-day courses on how to set up a farmers market. Such markets are now planned or already operating in numerous towns and cities across the UK. In the USA, there are over two dozen farmers markets in New York City, adding several million dollars annually to the incomes of farmers in nearby counties. Cornell University's 'New Farmers New Markets' programme aims to add to these numbers by recruiting and training a new generation of farmers to sell at the city's markets. The project is particularly interested in unemployed immigrants who have extensive farming skills.

At the same time, more and more people are also joining a variety of community supported agriculture (CSA) schemes in which consumers in towns and cities link up directly with a nearby farmer. In some cases, consumers purchase an entire season's produce in advance, sharing the risk with the farmer. In others, shares of the harvest are purchased in monthly or quarterly installments. Consumers usually have a chance to visit the farm where their food is grown, and in some cases their help on the farm is welcomed too. This movement is sweeping the world, from Switzerland, where it first started 25 years ago, to Japan where many thousands of people are involved. In America, where all but two percent of the population have already

been pulled off the land, the number of CSAs has mushroomed from two in 1986 to almost 1,000 today. While small farmers dependent on markets beyond their reach continue to go bankrupt at an alarming rate every year, direct marketing is reversing that trend.

In the UK, the local food movement is particularly successful and widespread. The idea is to eliminate the 'middle men' in the food business, who scoop up so much of the money spent on food. Instead, farmers forge direct relationships with small-scale processors and shops, or with consumers, whose orders of fresh produce are brought to them directly from the farm once a week. A local food-promoting scheme in the Forest of Dean, which has only been running for just over a year, has already sold £25,000 of local food to local people. The 'Forest Food Directory' lists 32 different food producers, with products ranging from organic and free-range meat, to vegetables and local cheeses. A survey early this year revealed that some small local producers have seen their turnover increase by up to 25 percent as a result of the scheme, and its popularity is still growing.

People buying direct from the producers of their food are often very enthusiastic about the quality, and about the manner in which it is bought. In her book, *Local Harvest*, Kate de Selincourt quotes some satisfied customers: "*The quality is superb... There is no possible comparison with the taste. You feel really sorry for the people going to the supermarket.*"

Farmers are also satisfied with such direct relationships: when farmers are allowed to sell in the local marketplace, more of the profit stays in their hands. Currently, only about 5 pence in every

pound spent on food goes to the farmer. The rest goes towards such things as transport, packaging, irradiation, colouring, advertising and corporate profit-margins. But when these links are closed, the farmer receives more money and the consumer pays less. Both win. Kate de Selincourt asked farmer Pat Finn why she sells direct to customers rather than through a supermarket or butcher's shop: *"We really enjoy the personal side of the work — it is nice to think that we have become so friendly with people just through business."*

Often, the joy of a direct connection between producers and consumers is that their ideals coincide. They want the same things: small-scale production and high organic quality. They both want freshness, variety and a non-exploitative price. Social life often flourishes when like-minded suppliers and consumers meet as friends.

Direct communication between producers and consumers creates a responsive economic system, one shaped by the needs of society rather than the needs of big business. Local food markets by their very nature create consumer demand for a wide range of products that are valued for their taste and nutritional content, rather than the ability to withstand the rigours of long-distance transport and to conform to supermarket specifications. This therefore helps to stimulate diversification, allowing farmers to change their mode of production from monoculture to diversified farming. The local food movement helps facilitate a return to mixed farming systems, where farmers can keep animals and grow some grain, grow some vegetables, some tree crops and some herbs on the same land. That diversity allows for cycles that reinforce one another in both

ecological and economic ways. When animals, grain and vegetables are combined on the same farm, they all feed each other: the grain and vegetables feed both humans and animals, while the straw provides bedding for animals and also converts poisonous slurry into valuable fertiliser. The farmer thus finds the required inputs within reach, without having to pay for them, whereas farmers who are forced to produce monocultures are dependent on ever more expensive inputs. A strong local food economy also provides farmers with the opportunity to diversify into value-added products.

Local production is also often conducive to a gradual reduction in the use of artificial chemicals and other toxic substances. Food sold locally does not need to contain preservatives or additives, and doesn't need to be transported vast distances in lorries or planes. In addition, when we produce food locally, we do not need to subject the land to the conformist rigours of centralised monoculture, eradicating competing plants, birds, insects and other animals. By promoting multicultures for local production, we allow people and nature space to move and breathe: diverse people, plants and animals regain their place in local ecosystems.

The local food economy is the root and fibre of the entire rural economy, and efforts to strengthen it thus have systemic benefits that reach far beyond the local food chain itself. Although only two percent of the UK population is employed in agriculture, 14 percent rely on it indirectly for a significant portion of their income. A complicated web of interdependence, comprising farmers, farm shops, small retailers and small wholesalers, and spreading out from farming into all of its allied trades, underpins the economy of the

market towns and villages, their tradespeople, bankers and other professional service-providers.

Simple steps towards closer links between farmers and consumers are thus helping to rebuild community, enhance human health and restore ecological balance. In joining the local food movement we take an apparently small step that is good for ourselves and our families. At the same time we also make a very real contribution towards preserving regional distinctiveness, biodiversity and the environment in general, and protecting jobs and rural livelihoods. This is true not only in the industrialised world, but particularly in 'developing' countries, where often as much as 80 percent of the population lives by farming, forestry or fishing. The drive towards cash crops for export pushes small producers off the land in many developing countries and often creates local food shortages. Ensuring that land and fisheries remain in the hands of small producers concerned with producing for the local market is a better guarantee of food security, economic health and ecological sustainability than large-scale export oriented production.

Big business would like us to believe that diversifying and localising food production leads to inefficiency, job losses and economic hardship. The reality is that the opposite is true: as more of the wealth created by the community stays in the community, jobs are created locally and the prosperity of small business is secured.

Tipping the Scales Towards Local Production

For local food systems to flourish, prosper and be replicated in large numbers around the world, changes at the policy level are clearly necessary. Current economic policies across the world are artificially lowering the prices of industrially-produced foods by shifting the costs of production onto the community and the environment. If groups campaigning for sustainable farming, wildlife issues and better food do not take these hidden subsidies into account, and if they do not challenge the economic basis of our current monocultural, export-based food system, they risk falling into the trap of arguing that consumers should pay *more* for better food — when, as farmers markets and CSAs show, they can actually pay *less*. This approach marginalises the poor and opens campaigners to charges of elitism. Furthermore, to overlook hidden subsidies is to miss a fantastic opportunity: if these resources were diverted towards decent agriculture and retailing, we could have better food at no extra cost at all. In fact, the price of fresh local food would come down.

Recognising the global consequences of the economic system also gives agricultural and environmental groups common cause with those campaigning for social justice and the ‘Third World’. Access to fresh, healthy food is coming to be seen as a fundamental human right, and these diverse bodies are now beginning to join hands to demand a different set of economic priorities, and the redrawing of the global economic map.

The most important thing to remember is that we *do* have the power to change things. The destructive global economy can only exist as long as we are prepared to accept and subsidise it. We can reject it.

And we can start today to build a local food movement and reap the benefits of re-linking farmers and consumers. Fresh, local food for all may be one of the most rewarding — and certainly the most delicious — results of the battle against globalisation.

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