



UNSCN

United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition

NEWS

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Advancing equity, equality and non-discrimination in food systems: Pathways to reform

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Motivations for food production

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More than enough food is produced to support everyone on earth, but recent estimates indicate that hunger – understood as widespread chronic undernutrition – affects more than 800 million people (FAO et al 2017). Why?

Many different factors help to explain the persistence of hunger, among them the recent upsurge of famine in armed conflict situations and climate disturbances (FAO et al 2017). Here, however, we explore another explanation: the fact that good nutrition for all is no longer the dominant motivation that drives food production. Centuries ago, most agriculture and fishing were done to feed the primary producers, their families and their local communities. Over time, producers' attention has shifted to the pursuit of wealth. Farmers and fishers sell to distant consumers or food processors, often through intermediaries controlling different segments of long supply chains.

This shift is well illustrated in the histories of some islands. In pre-contact Hawai'i, for example, food was abundant and people were healthy. Taro and other foods were produced to meet people's needs; one can eat only so much taro. However, with the advent of modernity, agriculture and nutrition were separated. Settlers came along and decided to produce rice for profit. There was a large-scale shift from taro to rice production in Hawai'i in the 1860s (Kent 2015a).

The rapid displacement of taro by rice led the local newspaper to ask, "where is our taro to come from?" (Haraguchi 1987). The disconnect between farming for food and farming for money became clear. The people whose taro supply was

threatened were not the people who benefited from rice exports. The Great Māhele, or division of lands, enacted in 1948 allowed non-Hawaiians to own land, opening the way not only for rice, but also for large sugar and pineapple plantations. This move to industrialized agriculture to serve distant customers was driven more by producers' concern for their own wealth than by any desire to contribute to the health of the consumers of their products.

There has been a massive shift toward the industrialization of food systems in much of the world, with local productive resources increasingly used to feed distant others, rather than to meet the nutritional needs of local people. Often, distant others are favoured by food producers because they have more money than local people.

Historically, local pre-modern, non-industrial food systems maintained tight links between agriculture and nutrition. While there has been a trend towards industrialization, the pre-modern systems still function in much of the world where farming is not tied to modern markets (ETC Group 2017). There are serious efforts underway to bring back pre-modern ways.

One approach to doing this is through agroecology, which seeks to replace the economic logic dominant in modern agriculture with an ecological logic. Agroecology evolved to meet the needs of people and the ecosystems in which they were embedded, in sustainable – almost timeless – systems (Anderson et al 2015; De Schutter 2010; IPES-Food 2016; Oakland Institute 2015). These methods are alive and doing well in many parts of the world, but they receive little attention or support from governments. Yet the effectiveness of pre-modern systems for providing good food supplies has been well documented (Inter Pares 2004; Kuhnlein et al 2009).

Agroecology is sometimes understood as the practice of working with nature in farming systems, but a broader understanding would include people and their social organization as part of the ecology. It would recognize that, for ensuring food security for all, community-based social organization of food production might make better sense than industrial modes of organization.

As travel and trade have grown throughout the world, many food producers have become disconnected from their locales. With the encouragement of trade, farmers scan the horizons for the highest bidders for their services. Often, local needs are bypassed. In pre-modern forms of agriculture, there were (and are) close linkages between producers and consumers, but in modern food systems, they are separated – not only by distance, but also by layers of marketers, processors and investors, all of which have their own distinct interests in the food system. While serving the interests of owners and investors in pursuing wealth, many farms, fisheries and food factories operate in ways that exploit their workers, their environment and their customers.

In modern agriculture, most people who buy from the large farms are wholesalers and processors, not the final consumers. Much of the production from modern agriculture goes to factories for transformation into radically different forms (Monteiro et al 2018). Large-scale wholesalers ship the products to the most lucrative markets, as illustrated by the global fish trade (Kent 2003). As the food system is modernized (industrialized), the products are increasingly directed to food processors and people with money, anywhere in the world, rather than to neighbours who just need basic food. The global shift of producers' motivation from producing food for health to producing food for wealth is well documented (Kaufman 2012; Lindgren 2013; Rosenthal 2013; Tudge 2013a and 2013b).

The demand for food has grown much faster than can be explained by population growth. It grows as a result of increasing incomes, especially among people with already high incomes (Kent 2011, pp. 28-40). Many people now consume far more than they need for an active and healthy life. People at all income levels now eat cheap hyper-processed foods rather than the whole or lightly processed foods that would be much better for them (da Costa Louzada et al 2018).

Advocates of large-scale modern agriculture often justify it by claiming economies of scale. However, rather than efficiency in production, the primary advantage of large farms may be that they have one owner profiting from the work of machines and many poorly paid laborers. This is incentive enough for many owners.

Some large farms are profitable because they pursue wealth in unsustainable ways, externalizing many of their social and environmental costs.

That pattern is illustrated by the excessive mining of groundwater in the Midwestern United States (Parker 2016) and by the deforestation in Brazil to satisfy the global demand for soybeans (Richards and Hoelle 2016). There are similar stories about the depletion of the soil in many parts of the world (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) (2017). Modern agriculture enterprises often grow through increasing concentration of control and externalizing their costs, not through increasing productivity, efficiency and sustainability (Holt-Giménez 2017; Williams and Holt-Giménez 2017).

Global food agencies ask how agriculture might make a stronger contribution to nutrition, but they should first ask how the two became separated. Why should a project focus on how agriculture investments can be more nutrition sensitive (FAO 2015a), implying that the first requirement is to make a profit for someone beyond the farmer? Why should a project's recommendations be based on the premise that "food systems provide for all people's nutritional needs, while at the same time contributing to economic growth" (FAO 2015b, p. 2). Must all food producers contribute to national economic growth?

The experiences of the US, India and many other countries suggest that economic growth does not necessarily improve the food security of the poor (Chin et al 2017; Thomson 2016). Low-level labourers in farms, fisheries and factories contribute a great deal to economic growth, but get little in return. Despite the great wealth in the world, the dominant food system does not provide for all of people's nutritional needs. The economic benefits flow upward and so does the food. The poor feed the rich (Kent 1982). The preoccupation with the increase in private wealth leads to severe exploitation of people and the environment. It is mainly the rich, not the poor, who benefit from economic growth.

The global agencies should pay more attention to the marketers and processors who come between the primary producers and the ultimate consumers. In the global food system, most of the power lies with these intermediaries. In high-income countries, these intermediaries receive the largest share of the money spent on food. Many of the primary food producers at the beginning of the value chain, working in the fields, on fishing boats and in food factories have such low incomes that they are unable to feed themselves adequately.

How might it be possible to return food systems to the mission of providing good food for everyone? One approach would be to shift to more community-oriented food systems. People in local communities are likely to care about one another's well-being, unlike industrial farmers who never get to know the final consumers of their products.

Karl Polanyi recognized that in so-called primitive cultures it was not money that made the difference:

It is the absence of the threat of individual starvation which makes primitive society, in a sense, more humane than market economy, and at the same time less economic ... [A]s a rule, the individual in primitive society is not threatened by starvation unless the community as a whole is in a like predicament ... destitution is impossible: whosoever needs assistance receives it unquestioningly ... There is no starvation in societies living on the subsistence margin.
(Polanyi 1944, 171-172)

Others put it this way:

When a community functions well, it is because of the active solidarity among its members. People look out for each other, help each other ... When individuals slip into poverty it is not simply because they have run out of money – it is also because their community has failed.
(Dessewfy and Hammer 1995)

Hunger arises when people don't have adequate control over their own life circumstances. Where people go hungry, we can be sure that others are controlling the resources around them and shaping the terms on which they live. The others' priority is serving their own interests, not those of the hungry. People need power, individually and in community with others, to shape their own lives and live in dignity. When people have decent opportunities and can enjoy the full benefits of their own labour, they live adequately. They do that even in harsh physical environments. In well-functioning communities, there is no reason to even suspect that anyone goes hungry (Dregger 2016).

This is not a call for turning back the clock. The task is to imagine, design and implement post-modern food systems – globally, nationally and locally – that draw on the best of both the pre-modern and modern worlds, and avoid their worst features (Kent 1988, 2014, 2015b, 2015c). As long as social systems are dominated by market relationships, hunger and other forms of malnutrition will persist. There is need for much more caring about people's well-being and for a deeper understanding of what caring is and how it works (Kent 2016).

Global and national agencies could facilitate efforts of local people to improve the food systems in their own communities (Kent 1988 and 2014). The connection between food production and nutrition could be restored through community-based initiatives. The need now is for social, not technological, innovation. This work would not be easy, but it would be the right thing to do.

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