Seeds of change: healthy food for everyone
Growing food sovereignty from the grassroots

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Food is central to our health, quality and length of life. It is integral to our local cultures: producing and eating together binds people, families and communities together, and good food is at the heart of many celebrations.

But the global food system is in crisis. Access to food is a basic human right, but the industrialisation and commercialisation of food is turning it into a commodity to make a profit for a few.

The rapid growth of industrial agriculture has done little to stem the scourge of hunger that hundreds of millions of people face on a daily basis. It has already pushed millions of small family farmers off the land in industrialised countries, and the same process is underway in non-industrialised countries, with farmers’ land increasingly being grabbed from them to make way for vast expanses of monoculture crops such as soybeans and oil palm for export. And highly processed, poor quality food is now the norm on supermarket shelves.
Meanwhile, food prices remain high. The use of intensive fossil fuel-based food production techniques has tied the price of food to the price of oil, so that when oil prices flare up, the cost of food goes with it. And the linking of food as commodities with financial markets means that financial speculation causes food price rises and volatility.

Sadly there is still a dominant perception that this industrialisation of agriculture is good for poor, hungry people and that we need more of it to lift people out of hunger. Through various initiatives, the UK and other rich governments are supporting multinational companies – with aid money, subsidies, regulations and laws – in their ever more ambitious quest to access new markets and ‘improve’ agriculture in developing countries.

But this process is a part of the problem, as the corporate sector gains increasing control over the food system and the commons at the expense of small-scale producers and consumers. Communities around the world are resisting this corporate take-over of their food systems and fighting back with positive and inspiring alternatives.
Food sovereignty can help us take back control of our food and agriculture systems. First proposed by the international peasants’ movement La Via Campesina in 1996, food sovereignty is “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”

Food sovereignty focuses on producing food for people rather than profit. It values small farmers; localises people’s control of land, food and water resources; and works with, rather than against, nature.

In order to achieve food sovereignty, we need to dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and prioritise local and national economies and markets. Food sovereignty offers us a strategy for doing this.

And food sovereignty’s seeds of change are sprouting up all over the place. Five countries – Nepal, Mali, Senegal, Venezuela and Bolivia – have made achieving food sovereignty government policy.
For over a century, farming in Venezuela had been neglected because of a reliance on the profits from the oil industry to pay for the large scale import of staple foods. This had led to a desertion of rural areas, with only 12 per cent of the Venezuelan population living in the countryside, making it the most urbanised country in Latin America. In 1998 the importance of developing local, sustainable agriculture as a means to ensuring a secure supply of food for the population became enshrined in the constitution.

Government support has included: land reform that has allowed millions of acres of land owned by large landowners to be reclaimed for agriculture; laws requiring banks to provide credit to farmers at reasonable rates; supplying farmers with equipment such as tractors and seeds; and giving farmers access to training in organic agricultural techniques. Farmers are also able to sell their crops to a government agricultural corporation rather than relying on intermediaries, which has ensured a fairer price for their products. Overall food production in Venezuela has increased by one quarter since 1998. The country has become self-sufficient in its two most important grains: maize and rice.
Elsewhere, in Brazil, Cuba and countries in Africa, policies that promote **agroecological farming** have successfully increased yields and farmers’ incomes. This low input, low cost, environmentally-friendly approach to farming involves mixed crop and livestock management, agroforestry (interplanting trees and crops) and using natural predators to control pests and diseases. In Tanzania, for example, the western provinces of Shinyanga and Tabora, which used to be known as the ‘Desert of Tanzania’, have been transformed through agroforestry.

A 2010 study of 286 agroforestry projects in 57 developing countries revealed an average increase in crop yields of 79 per cent. The Soil Association predicts that ecological production, less waste and more equitable consumption could feed a global population of 9 billion in 2050.

The effectiveness of agroecological methods was confirmed by the first International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). This UN, World Bank and WHO sponsored report is based on the findings of 400 experts who considered the state of global agriculture today and identified key challenges and options for the future of farming. It was approved by 58 governments in 2008. The report argues for a fundamental change in the way agriculture is practised in order to eliminate hunger and make food production sustainable.

Agroecology not only benefits the environment and makes farming more resilient, but can also increase productivity, particularly for small-scale farmers.

> “Here in India, in Bangalore, I met a farmer... He has five acres of land. I visited his farm and I found that he has made use of nature’s free gifts... How? He has a lot of trees, different varieties... coconuts, banana, papaya, and other fruits, other vegetables... mangos, avocados... he understands the requirement to maximise the use of sunlight. So he does it really scientifically. Then he knows that these things give you the things that you require, the fruits and vegetables and so on, but you have to return it back to the soil.”

Sarath Fernando, director of MONLAR, a Sri Lankan member of La Via Campesina, talking about a farmer who is practising zero budget natural farming. Previously in debt and contemplating suicide, the farmer had settled all his loans within three years and now spends very little money on inputs for his farm.
When Haiti was forced to drop import taxes on grain, subsidised rice from US agribusiness flooded in and many Haitians could no longer survive as farmers. Now the Haitian Platform for Alternative Development is working with farmers to restore native varieties and sustainable livelihoods.
Dig in for land reform

Land is essential to farming, and the right to use and manage it is a central concern for anyone advocating food sovereignty. But at the moment farmers around the world are rapidly losing or having to leave their land, as ‘land grabbing’ escalates, to grow food and biofuel crops on an industrial scale and usually for export.

The people most vulnerable to land grabbing are those who do not have secure access to or legal ownership of their land. This is often due to community land tenure or other traditional systems that conflict with the ‘Western’ approach, which favours land ownership by private individuals and undermines the practice of common land being used sustainably by communities. Land reforms that ensure access to land for poor majorities are an essential component of sustainable and equitable development, and land reform is a demand of many farming communities and indigenous peoples around the world.

_Above: Farm reoccupation, Goianá, Brazil, September 2013. In March 2010 about 150 MST families set up camp in the area to fight for a share of the Fortaleza de Sant’Anna farmlands. They finally succeeded in August 2013 and can now begin to produce healthy food for the people of the region._
In Brazil, landless peasants have united to form the 1.5 million strong *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST) (Landless Workers’ Movement). They are steadily and strategically reasserting their rights to land, in spite of the often violent response of large landowners.

Two thirds of farmland in Brazil is owned by just 3 per cent of the population. But Brazil’s constitution states that the social function of land is not being properly fulfilled unless more than 80 per cent of a farm’s land is being used effectively, environmental and labour standards are being respected, and both owners and workers are benefitting. The MST seeks out lands that fail these criteria, and hundreds of peasants camp on the land for between two and five years while they seek collective title to the land through Brazil’s courts. If they win their case, then the peasants begin the long process of building a community and establishing agroecological farms.

Although this is a difficult and dangerous route to take, it is also trailblazing: the MST has won land titles for over 350,000 families in 2,000 settlements; and a further 180,000 families are occupying land while waiting for government recognition.
Food production co-operatives exist in many countries across the world, especially in Asia. In the Philippines for example, there are 42,000 registered ‘co-ops’ with six million members, covering the rice, sugar, forestry, fisheries, tobacco and horticulture sectors.

Co-operatives are democratically owned and operated and can help producers in many ways. They can help to reduce costs through economies of scale and shared investments, through pooled resources, equipment, credit and technology. Collective action through co-operatives can increase farmers’ power in relation to processors or buyers, so they can negotiate better prices, as well as in relation to public policy making. During the 2007-8 food price spike, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said that, “while small farmers acting alone did not benefit from higher food prices, those acting collectively in strong producer organisations and co-operatives were better able to take advantage of market opportunities and mitigate the negative effects of food and other crises”.

Co-operatives
Co-operatives also offer huge potential for Consumer Supported Agriculture, bringing consumers and farmers into direct contact with each other, bypassing the food processing and distribution giants, making small-scale farming viable again, and cutting the cost of food along the way. In Japan, for example, ‘Teikei’ systems were initiated in 1971 to link consumer groups with organic farmers. The groups have direct contact with each other, and both provide labour and capital to create their own delivery systems.

The Basque union of small farmers, EHNE-Bizkaia, has gone one step further and established the Red Nekasarea, a network of producers and consumers based on mutual aid, where everyone is equally responsible for the food system. Production is planned based on agreements with consumers, and the solidarity between farmers has created a level of security which has started to allow young people to return to farming.

"This isn’t just something for people who ideologically believe in saving the environment"

"It’s genuinely for the community, whatever your beliefs. It’s not just about organic, it’s about people coming out here and reconnecting with their food supply…and hopefully getting something that’s fresher and better for it."

Lawrence Guy, wholesale manager at The Community Farm, Chew Valley, near Bristol. The farm is collectively owned; a community share issue raised just over £125,000 from 400 founder members, enabling the purchase of the farm, its veg-box scheme and wholesale operation.
Growing enthusiasm in the city

Enthusiasm for urban agriculture is also seeing the increasingly imaginative use of derelict sites, roadsides, roofs, walls and even offices. In Cuba, for example, the country moved to 80 per cent organic agriculture and from a majority of large state owned farms to a majority of small co-operatives and privately owned farms in 15 years.

With 80 per cent of Cubans living in cities, providing enough food to feed an urban population when fuel scarcity made transportation of food difficult was a challenge. City-dwelling Cubans made use of small vacant lots, raised beds and their own yards and patios to grow their own food wherever space was available using organic permaculture methods. Now urban gardens provide 50 per cent of the vegetables needed by the 2.2 million residents of Havana. Such practices can really benefit the urban population, and the urban poor in particular. Urban households engaged in urban gardening consume a greater quantity of food, more fruit and vegetables and a more diverse diet.

Above: Los Charavares urban agriculture centre, Miranda state, Venezuela, July 2012. Organic food grows in a space beside a highway that was reclaimed in October 2011. The food is sold on site to local people at affordable prices. Medicinal and ornamental plants are also grown and sold. Los Charavares is also an education centre where people can come to learn about growing food.
Managing food supplies

Another alternative to open market policies that governments can use is food supply management. This involves governments and farmers working together to make sure that enough food is produced, but not too much. This approach means that the prices farmers receive for their products improve, and agricultural subsidies can be dramatically reduced. Dumping surplus food on global markets, which seriously affects small farmers in other countries, can also be prevented. Supply management has been used successfully in Canada, in its dairy, poultry and egg sectors, for over thirty years, and the European Milk Marketing Board is calling for the same policies in the milk sector in the EU.

Seed swapping

One of the ways in which people have traditionally fostered low cost local food production is through seed swapping. The nurturing of seeds from one generation of plant to the next is fundamental to the continued development of locally adapted and culturally appropriate foods. But this practice is being forcefully discouraged by companies such as Monsanto which now ‘own’ many of the seeds that farmers are using, and want to make sure that new seeds are purchased every year. The EU is introducing a new and draconian EU seed law, which effectively makes exchanging seeds illegal unless they have been registered (an expensive and time-consuming process which is only feasible for large seed companies).
Food is for people, not profit

A fundamental barrier to achieving food sovereignty is unfair international trade agreements that are supporting an accelerating shift towards large-scale, export-oriented agriculture projects. The trade system is aiding and abetting commercial interests that are ramping up demand for land in a manner that “firmly subordinates the rights and interests of millions of poor rural people”, according to the International Land Coalition.

For example, India’s long-standing restrictions on investment by giant supermarkets, including Tesco, Metro, Ahold and Carrefour, have protected small shopkeepers and street vendors across the sub-continent, sheltering 30 to 40 million jobs from the harsh impacts of corporate-led economic globalisation. But these European retailers have lobbied hard for access to be granted through the EU-India trade negotiations, and the Indian government’s resistance to foreign investment is crumbling in the face of an economic downturn. India has announced that it will now allow foreign retailers up to 51 per cent investment in ‘multi-brand’ companies in India.

Co-operatives need support and strengthening in light of the difficulties posed by corporate-driven globalisation. For example, in the Philippines, the National Onion Growers’ Co-operative Marketing Association (NOGROCOMA), which was founded in 1954, brings growers together to “sustain the Philippines’ self-sufficiency in onions”. The onions are grown in seasonal rotation in the rice paddy fields (during the dry season), and for decades this practice was protected by a ban on imported onions. However, when the Philippines joined the World Trade Organisation in 1995, the ban was lifted, opening local markets to increasingly tough competition from China.

La Troja, a ‘fair trade and solidarity economy’ shop in Costa Rica is a warehouse set up by Friends of the Earth Costa Rica, in response to the advent of CAFTA-DR, a free trade agreement between Central American countries and the US, which threatens Costa Rica’s domestic food production. La Troja enables small-scale producers to store and sell basic grains such as maize, beans, rice and other non-perishable products. It also stocks perishable products including jellies, marmalades, chocolate products and handcrafted goods from the Ngobe peoples, and soap, shampoo, and honey.
The corporate takeover of our land, food and agriculture is a multi-tentacled project with disastrous consequences for people and the environment. We need to contest this corporate capture whilst at the same time as building alternatives from the grassroots.

Food sovereignty gives us the framework within which to do this, inspiring examples to build upon, positive frameworks and policies to draw from and a strong and vibrant movement to be part of and work with.

Food is fundamental for life and reclaiming our food system is an essential part of claiming our rights to a healthy life and to securing economic justice. Doing so is personal and political. There are steps we can take at all levels, whether that’s changing where and how we shop or producing our own food, or whether that’s the political system we believe in and the action we take.

We can all become part of the movement for food sovereignty.

*Above:* Members of the União Nacional de Camponeses (national farmers’ union) in rural Mozambique.
Part of the Exploring Alternatives pamphlet series

Anyone campaigning for change will regularly come across the question ‘so what is your alternative?’

It’s a question that often throws us. We have lived through 30 years of ‘free market’ mantra in which corporate power, the efficiency of the private sector, and the need to appease financial institutions are never questioned. It is difficult for us to imagine, let alone express, what a different world might look like.

This series of short booklets is an attempt to help activists answer the question. It doesn’t give a prescription for what another world would like look. Rather, it draws on current struggles around the world to show that alternative models are being built right now.

The alternatives in this series give us a glimpse into a different sort of society. They are intended to provoke and inspire – to wake us from the nightmare of a world economy that revolves around profit and loss, so that we might imagine a world truly fit for human beings.

Produced by the World Development Movement (WDM) as part of the Economic Justice Project. WDM works in solidarity with people in the global south to fight the causes of poverty and inequality. It is one of the organisations which is part of the Economic Justice Project. See www.wdm.org.uk and www.economicjusticeproject.org.uk