

Everyone eating local can't be that far away



If the globalised economy with its associated ills is the cause of the global food crisis, environmental destruction and the breakdown of communities, you may be wondering what a healthy, human-centred food production and distribution system would look like? **Jo Immig** meets the internationally recognised pioneer of the localisation movement, Helena Norberg-Hodge (left), and discovers why the organic movement needs to help reframe the global food debate to place the localisation of organic food systems at its centre.

THE GLOBAL FOOD ECONOMY

In the face of major global crises, such as climate change and the financial meltdown, people involved in the organic movement can significantly redirect the course of food production and distribution.

According to Helena Norberg-Hodge, it's important to develop a greater understanding of the systemic effects of the global economy and its impact on food production systems.

This understanding brings the realisation that we need to abandon the idea of a single globalised food system in favour of the plurality of local organic food systems.

The 'global food economy' is 'a centralised, top-down system, dominated by a handful of multinational corporations that waste a tremendous amount of resources with their continuous import and export of food between countries, like flying apples to be washed and waxed in South Africa, then flown back to the United Kingdom,' says Norberg-Hodge.

Integral to the global food economy is the process of corporate mega-mergers. As the global arena is opened up to giants a situation is created where small players can't survive. The global economy systematically favours corporations at the expense of the small and local, explains Norberg-Hodge.

The global food economy is discussed as a singular entity, which is an important point to grasp in order to understand why it's essential to move towards local organic food economies.

'I often hear it said that the global economy is somehow inevitable and can't be changed, but it's simply not the case. It's been constructed in a relatively short period of time and it can be changed,' says Norberg-Hodge. 'People all around the world are beginning to change it. There is a rapidly growing local food movement worldwide, but unfortunately the dominant trend is still in the other direction,' she adds.

She explains, 'In order to fully understand its origins you really need to look back hundreds of years to see what happened with slavery, and traders wanting to amass wealth by forcing people away from self-sufficient and diversified production and toward cash crops like tea, coffee, sugar and bananas.'

Whilst acknowledging that people

will always trade, it was at this point, she believes, that an exploitative and unhealthy relationship developed between producers and traders.

Today much of the cost of the global food system comes out of taxes. The public pays for the global food economy with huge subsidies in transport, infrastructure and energy. Regulations also favour the giants at the expense of the small player.

Global food is actually very expensive, but the costs have been hidden or externalised. The real price you pay for the 'convenience' of global food, in addition to billions of tax dollars, is exposure to chemical residues and genetically modified organisms, over-packaging, poor quality food and health problems such as obesity and heart disease.

FOOD TRAVELS LONG DISTANCES

Norberg-Hodge noticed that something was amiss in the 1970s, while researching the impact of western development on the people of Ladakh, also known as 'Little Tibet'. She saw the 'craziness of butter being transported on a four-day journey from one side of the Himalayas to the other, yet sold more cheaply in the market than locally made butter.'

Then in the early 1980s in her native country, Sweden, she discovered that potatoes were being sent to Italy to be washed, put in plastic bags, and then sent back to Sweden. 'There are countless examples of this insane movement of food over huge distances. The good news is that people are becoming aware of it and are discussing food miles as a real issue,' she says.

Clearly a dramatic shift has occurred around the world. And it's really only been in the last 50 years that we have gone from eating food grown relatively nearby, to consuming food that has been transported long distances.

'Also with this movement of food came the increased need for refrigeration, packaging, artificial preservatives and the greater use of resources to keep it all going,' says Norberg-Hodge.

'The quality and nutrition of food has been dramatically reduced, as has the world's agricultural biodiversity by a staggering 75 per cent,' she claims, 'largely due to the pressure on farmers to use varieties that suit machinery and provide a long shelf life.'

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LOCALFOOD

Where is it all headed? 'The disaster scenario that awaits us if we continue down this path is that farming will be replaced by a techno-industrial synthetic process of producing food that largely renders people useless.

'There are already mega-mergers of seed companies occurring, so essentially we're heading towards Global Food Inc.,' says Norberg-Hodge.

UNDERSTANDING ROOT CAUSES

The most important aspect for the organics industry to understand is the workings of the global economy and its impact on food.

'We really need to fully understand the reasons why the global food economy has been such a disaster for agriculture, communities and the environment everywhere and why, conversely, local food economies are a win, win, win,' says Norberg-Hodge.

A common mistake, she believes, is to only see things from the consumer's point of view, rather than looking at it also from the producer's side, which naturally leads to consideration of how and where the food is grown, processed and transported.

Although about half the global population still lives on the land, the process of globalisation, Norberg-Hodge points out, is systematically pushing people into urban areas where they are disenfranchised and marginalised.

'I also see a real denigration of farming and working on the land as a meaningful way of life,' she says. Consider the frequent statement that organic farming is 'labour-intensive', as though somehow this is a bad thing. Thinking of it as 'job rich' puts a very different spin on the issue.

LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD SYSTEMS

What do local organic food systems look like? 'When I first started this work, there was very little to show; now there is actually a remarkable amount of local food initiatives made possible by a collaboration between consumers and

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farmers,' says Norberg-Hodge.

Collaborations are often initiated by consumers in big cities, such as local farmers' markets, co-ops and community supported agriculture (CSA), an umbrella term that incorporates subscription farming, where a community or families will pay the farmer in advance for a whole year's supply, giving the farmer the capital to work with.

'I see community supported agriculture thriving all over the world and there are wonderful examples particularly in the UK, Germany, Vermont and California, where thousands of families support and are sustained by local farms,' she says.

On the benefits of local organic food systems, Norberg-Hodge says the shift from global to local increases the profits for the farmer, lowers the price for the consumer and, with organic farming, helps the environment in a multitude of ways.

'Smaller markets and shorter distances encourage diversification and when you encourage farmers to diversify you are fundamentally encouraging a structural change that is more ecologically sustainable and reduces the need for external inputs.'

Globally traded organics on the

other hand still tend to be grown in vast monocultures, requiring lots of external inputs and travelling large distances. It's very hard to truly keep production organic, compared with doing so in a naturally diverse local system.

'Establishing local food economies doesn't mean there won't be any trade, which is a common misconception people have,' says Norberg-Hodge.

'I'm talking about local as a relative term. It's about shortening the distances, not an absolute. If you're living on the border of France near Germany, for instance, you may find it makes more sense to get your food from Germany,' she explains.

The distance organic food travels is certainly something that's currently being discussed by the organic industry. The UK Soil Association has proposed it may even become part of their certification standard.

What advice would Norberg-Hodge give to the Australian organic industry? 'If I were part of the Australian organic industry, I'd certainly be seeking a market relatively close to home,' she says.

The policy changes the government needs to focus on are really very simple, she explains. 'We need to reassess what we tax, how we spend those taxes and what we regulate.'

SEEDS OF HOPE AND CHANGE

In the face of the global economic juggernaut, what gives Norberg-Hodge the greatest hope is that a vibrant local food movement has sprung up around the world. Farmers' markets, community gardens and community-supported agriculture are all flourishing.

'If governments would implement



"To defend the small farm is to defend a large part, and the best part, of our cultural heritage"

Wendell Berry

changes, such as shifting subsidies and re-regulating, there would be more thriving smaller towns with job opportunities in local food economies. Cities would begin to shrink, rather than continue to grow,' she says.

The most encouraging thing of all, she concludes, is that the biggest social movement in the world today, La Via Campesina, or International Peasant Movement, has a staggering 450 million members, supports local food and food sovereignty and opposes trade deregulation. Why nobody seems to have heard of them is astounding, and says a great deal about the problem of globalised media.

Helena Norberg-Hodge is founder and director of the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), which runs programs on four continents aimed at strengthening ecological diversity and community, with a particular emphasis on local food and farming. She is the author of numerous works, including the inspirational classic, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, which – together with an award-winning film of the same



title – has been translated into more than 40 languages. She is co-founder of the International Forum on Globalisation and the Global Eco-village Network, and a recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, or 'Alternative Nobel Prize'. ●

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Further Information

International Society for Ecology & Culture
www.isec.org.uk
 La Via Campesina – www.viacampesina.org
 Sydney Food Fairness Alliance
www.sydneyfoodfairness.org.au
 Australian City Farms & Community
 Gardens Network
www.communitygarden.org.au

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