

Restoring the Link Between Farmer and Consumer, Challenging the Corporate Hijack of Global Food and Agriculture

From Copenhagen to India

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Food systems have been reduced to a model of industrialised agriculture controlled by a few transnational food corporations together with a small group of huge retailers. It is a model designed to generate profits... Instead of being dedicated to the production of food ... it focuses increasingly on the production of raw materials such as agrofuels, animal feeds or commodity plantations... it has caused the enormous loss of agricultural holdings and the people who make their living from those holdings... it promotes a diet which is harmful to health and which contains insufficient fruit, vegetables and cereals.

The above quote comes from the final declaration of the Nyeleni Europe food sovereignty forum in 2011. Nyeleni Europe represents community-supported agriculture collectives, organic farmer unions, local food cooperatives, seed swapping organisations, food activists, farmers' markets and community gardens. The organisation forms part of the global resistance to the corporate hijack of food and agriculture that has resulted in bad food, poor health, environmental degradation and the marginalisation and displacement of small farmers along with the destruction of local (and global) food sovereignty and security.

The global agritech/agribusiness sector is poisoning people and the environment with its pesticides, herbicides, GMOs and various other chemical inputs. The Rockefeller clan [exported the petrochemical intensive 'green revolution'](#) around the world with the aim of ripping up indigenous agriculture to cement its hegemony over global agriculture and to help the US create food deficit regions and thus use agriculture as a tool of foreign policy.

Last year, [31 pesticides](#) with a value running into billions of pounds could have been banned in the EU because of potential health risks if a blocked EU paper on hormone-mimicking chemicals had been acted upon. The global agrichemicals lobby is responsible for preventing public protection from chronic diseases and environmental damage. Certain industries are raking in massive profits to the detriment of the public's health and the environment.

Also last year, [a study](#) by the University of Koblenz-Landau explained that no field data-based evaluation of the regulatory acceptable concentrations (RACs) and therefore of the overall protectiveness of EU pesticide regulations exists. The researchers found that 44.7 percent of the 1,566 cases of measured insecticide concentrations in EU surface waters exceeded their respective RACs. The findings challenged the efficacy of the regulatory environmental risk assessment conducted for pesticide authorisation and concluded that

effective mitigation measures are urgently needed to reduce the risks arising from agricultural insecticide use.

In the US, some 34,000 pesticides are currently registered for use. Drinking water it is [often contaminated by pesticides](#), more babies are being born with [preventable birth defects](#) due to pesticide exposure and chemicals are so prevalent that they show up in breast milk. Many illnesses are on the rise too, such as asthma, autism and learning disabilities, birth defects and reproductive dysfunction, diabetes and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases along with several types of cancer. The [connection to pesticide exposure](#) is clear.

Moreover, pollinating insects have been impacted by chemical herbicides and pesticides, which are also [stripping the soil of nutrients](#). As a result, for example, there has been a 41.1 to 100 percent [decrease in vitamin A in 6 foods](#): apple, banana, broccoli, onion, potato and tomato. Both onion and potato saw a 100 percent loss of vitamin A between 1951 and 1999.

In India, the impacts of depleted soils, water-guzzling cash crops and loss of food diversity and biodiversity due to green revolution practices have been condemned by campaigner and farmer [Bhaskar Save](#) and by botanist [Stuart Newton](#). The fact that, according to Newton, mineral-depleted soils lead to undernourishment speaks volumes.

The unnecessary transportation of food over long distances also does not help, not least in terms of energy consumption and pollution and chemical treatment and processing.

The modern corporate-controlled food system is not only bad for our health and the environment but farmers' incomes are also being forced downwards. Take the case of the India farmer, for instance.

According to the [Navdanya website](#), a customer pays 10 rupees for a 50-gram packet of Pepsico's Lays chips. A potato farmer in West Bengal gets only 50 paise (half a rupee) to one rupee for a kg of potato, which is only 0.02 percent of what the customers pays for the processed food packet.

While the customer pays 50 rupees for a kg of branded atta (wheat flour), the farmer only gets 14 rupees out of which he has spent a large share on buying chemicals and earns only 1,645 rupees per month per acre. This amounts to a mere 51.15 rupees per day. The daily legal wage for a skilled worker is 423 rupees. Even an unskilled worker's minimum wage is 348 rupees per day. The farmer therefore earns only 1/10th of the minimum legal wage. According to Vandana Shiva,

Farming is one of the most skilled vocations because a farmer is a soil scientist and soil conserver, a seed breeder, manager of water, weeds and pests. Industry produces the chemicals that are destroying the planet and our health. Only small farmers can take care of the soil and the health of the soil is linked to our health.

The small-scale farmer, the [backbone of global food production](#), especially in the Global South, is being discriminated against through various policies (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)), marginalised and forced from the land. At the same time, however, the urban consumer across the world seems ever more disconnected from agriculture. The consumer has often become what Vandana Shiva describes as an "[ignorant link](#)" in the food chain.

Ultimately, the crisis affecting food and agriculture results from the capture of governments and international policy-making bodies by corporate interests (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)) and the relations of profit-driven global capitalism that, for example, fuel [distorted trade](#), [food commodity](#) and [land](#) speculation, poverty and [food deficit](#) areas, etc.

Restoring the link between producer and consumer

While we should rightly expose and campaign against this system and the international and national bodies and public officials that have been co-opted by global agribusiness and agri-chemical companies, there are many grass-root initiatives throughout the world that are challenging the corporate dominance of the food system by bringing small-scale farmers and consumers together. By raising consumer awareness and rebuilding what has become a broken link between the urban dweller and the farmer, the aim is to create a better food system from the bottom up: in other words, 'food smart' environments whereby citizens actually know what they are eating and where their food comes from.

In Kerala, India, for example, [Thanal supports](#) a sustainable form of agriculture that enhances incomes for local farmers and their families as well as food safety and security for consumers by promoting organic farming and linking farmers to consumers through its 'organic bazaar'.

The bazaar provides a wide range of organic products produced by organic farmers across the state. It was launched in 2003 to bring organic farmers and consumers together and was made possible through consistent outreach and sensitisation among marginal farmers in different pockets of Kerala to enlarge the supply base. Consumer sensitisation and awareness programmes also played an important role in getting more consumers to support the initiative.

In Europe too, there is an increasing awareness that local farmers need to secure a decent price for their produce, that organic food is healthier and that locally sourced food eradicates many of the environmental and health-related problems associated with transporting food over long distances. [Copenhagen Food Cooperative](#) is a city-wide initiative that offers an alternative to the profit-driven supermarket chains, it focuses on offering fresh, organic seasonal fruits and vegetables at fair but affordable prices. Founded in 2008, the initiative now has 3,000 and 10 local outlets supplying five tons of vegetables each week sourced from local farms.

All members are expected to put in three hours of work each month on a voluntary basis. This could be packing vegetables in the shop, ordering vegetables, arranging debates, fixing the website, etc. Any profit is used to reduce the price of the vegetables or to develop the co-op or socially responsible projects in the city. By buying from local farmers the costs are lowered, the produce is fresh and the impact on the environment is kept to a minimum. The co-operative supports local farmers who produce organic or biodynamic produce, which in turn supports sustainable agriculture that is good for the soil, the farmer and the health of the consumer

Throughout Europe there are similar community-supported agriculture initiatives that are bringing farmers and urban consumers together to support local farmers who produce healthy food that both respects the environment and keeps rural communities alive. From farmers' markets to food co-ops, many consumers are no longer 'ignorant links' in a globalised corporate-controlled chain.

The [Nyeleni Europe website](#) contains some valuable information and serves as a resource for the food sovereignty movement in Europe. As a global movement, Nyeleni has a [radical agenda](#) that is committed to challenging, among other things:

Imperialism, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy, and all systems that impoverish life, resources and eco-systems, and the agents that promote the above such as international financial institutions, the World Trade Organisation, free trade agreements, transnational corporations, and governments that are antagonistic to their peoples.

Less overtly political in scope, perhaps, is the concept of ‘food smart cities’. Some key principles underlying this concept include decentralized co-operation on food security and on sustainable development. In Europe, the initiative ‘[Food Smart Cities for Development](#)’ aims at creating a network of smart cities to guide European local authorities and civil society organizations in drafting, developing and implementing local food related policies. The initiative aims to maximise the contributions of local food policies to sustainable urban development and to increase understanding of the relation between local and global food systems. One aim is to enhance knowledge on how local food systems can contribute to sustainable cities worldwide and what role cities can take in the global challenge to optimise food sovereignty and sustainability.

While governments, trade agreements and regulatory agencies remain tethered to the interests of the powerful corporations that have come to define global food and agriculture in their own profit-driven image, local communities are fighting back with grass-root initiatives and city authorities are at least placing pertinent issues on the agenda for action and debate.

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