

PEAK FOOD

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Food Sovereignty

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Food Sovereignty

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Responding to the National Food Plan

The global food system, it seems, has gone bonkers. In theory, its main aim should be to make sure that everyone has enough good food to eat. It would of course be nice too if the people doing the work of producing the food had decent livelihoods, and that ecosystems weren't destroyed or the climate destabilised in the process. But let's start with the basic goal: good, healthy food for all.

Some of us are indeed eating well—but more and more aren't. Estimates of the numbers of malnourished hover around the one billion mark, and are likely to increase as GFC Mark II kicks in. Perhaps as many as two billion additional people experience constant food insecurity, because they live on or beneath the poverty line of the equivalent of two dollars a day.

Then we have obesity, no longer an epidemic but a pandemic, according to the *Lancet*. A pandemic is an epidemic with wings on—think HIV, cholera and smallpox. Six years ago the World Health Organisation put the numbers of obese adults globally at a minimum of 400 million, or 10 per cent of the total adult population. Rates in the United States and Australia are three times as high and growing, and childhood obesity is also on a steep upwards curve. To date, no government has made any serious inroads into stemming this modern-day scourge.

What we have, in fact, is a deeply dysfunctional global food system that generates the paradoxical 'stuffed and starved' phenomenon, as author Raj Patel so succinctly puts it. Why does it do this? Quite simply, because its basic purpose is not actually to feed us all well, but to generate growing profits for the large transnationals that

are its true beneficiaries. And the global food system excels at producing profits.

Take US-owned Cargill, for example, the world's largest grain processing and meat packing corporation. Cargill's sales have more than doubled since 2000, while its profits have risen 500 per cent to \$US2.6 billion in 2010—and that figure is a hefty fall from the \$US3.95 billion it earned in 2008, during the last round of extreme food price volatility. So far this year its profits are up nearly 50 per cent on the 2010 figure, once again taking advantage of sharp rises in commodity prices.

There's a slight hitch in this happy story of profits ever after. The global food system developed in its current form largely as a result of the bounty of cheap fossil fuel energy that became available after World War II. Some say the dependency is such that it takes ten calories of this form of energy to produce one calorie of food. Fossil fuels, as the name suggests, are a finite resource. There's an emerging consensus that we've entered, or are now entering, the peak of oil production. Peak gas production is due in another decade or so.

Because it's capitalist, the global food system wants to expand, and expand endlessly. Because it's utterly dependent on cheap energy, it can't achieve this, certainly not in its current industrial-scale form. This conundrum has led people to predictions of 'peak food'—the point in time when global food demand outstrips supply—followed by mass famine, chaos and the return of the four horsemen.

This sort of neo-Malthusianism has its difficulties. To begin with, when we take into account the amount of grain that's diverted to feeding animals in the factory farming system and used to produce agro-fuels, the world actually produces enough food now to feed ten to twelve billion people. And yet this system is incredibly profligate: as much as half of all food produced in OECD countries is wasted at some point in the food chain.

While the world's not actually short of food—even as millions starve amid abundance—there

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remains the social problem of a decades-long rural crisis which has seen farmers who are surplus to the system's requirements dispossessed and mistreated globally. There are various ways in which this has been achieved, most recently via trade liberalisation. In agriculture, far too often this has meant that wealthy regions like North America and Europe dump their heavily subsidised surplus commodities into Southern markets, undermining conditions for millions of small farmers.

Arguably, a system so dysfunctional and fragile requires a thorough overhaul, if not complete replacement. But that's not what the Australian government has in mind, as it consults with the Australian public on the formulation of a first-ever National Food Plan. On the contrary, we as a country are 'food secure', and our main challenge is to lift our rates of 'competitiveness' and 'productivity'. The path to global food security is most assuredly through further trade liberalisation, disregarding that the numbers of malnourished—most of them, paradoxically, small farmers, with the majority women—have actually risen more than 30 per cent since the World Trade Organisation came into existence. Peak oil and its impacts are not deemed worthy of mention, while technological change—no doubt in the form of GMOs and nanotechnology, productivity improvements and free trade—are the guaranteed recipe for a sustainable food future for Australia.

The government's approach to formulating food policy is hardly surprising: the idea of a National Food Plan was prompted by discussions with large retailers, large commodity producers and agri-business. Representatives of these sectors have been meeting with the Federal Minister of Agriculture, Joe Ludwig, as a Food Policy Advisory Working Group since shortly after the 2010 federal election. The agenda is unknown: despite repeated requests, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) has not made available the minutes of any of these meetings.

Discussing the need for a National Food Plan is a step in the right direction, at least beginning to inject some coherence into a food system that is fragmented across so many government departments. Unfortunately, with food policy formation driven so far by large industry and commodity groups, there is every reason to expect that the plan, when it appears, will respond mainly to their needs for infinitely expanding production and constantly growing profit.

Who's left out of this picture? For starters, the majority of Australian farmers, who are not commodity producers but grow food for domestic consumption. Since farming and food generally has become devalued in our culture, most farmers depend on other sources of income to make ends meet; the pressures are such that, on average, five leave the land every day. Many of the remaining farmers form part of the growing community food sector, which also includes the hundreds of thousands of Australians involved in the community gardens

and farmers' markets that are increasingly common features of our urban and rural landscapes. This sector has been largely ignored in the policy development process, as have the ranks of dedicated and experienced health professionals who are confronted daily by the consequences of the obesity pandemic. Finally, there is the general Australian public, of which two million are food insecure at some point during the year.

Yet the government's business-as-usual approach is not the only show in town. For twenty years small farmers from around the world have been talking to each other about everything that is wrong with the current food system, and working on their alternative: food sovereignty. In the food sovereignty vision, food systems are diverse, de-centralised and democratic. They serve the basic needs of people for good, healthy food and decent livelihoods, not the interests of corporations for profit. Food is produced according to agro-ecological methods that restore health to damaged ecosystems and waterways, with reliance on external inputs, including fossil fuels, progressively reduced. The community food sector flourishes as markets and distribution networks are localised. People everywhere reconnect with the sources of their food, and the ecological rift between humanity and nature begins to be healed.

Can food sovereignty feed the world? Extensive research by leading experts like Miguel Altieri, and Olivier de Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Food, is showing that agro-ecological polycultures outperform the yields of input-intensive monocultures by 20 per cent or more, when total production from all crops is taken into account. It's often said that the Green Revolution staved off disaster with its high-yielding hybrids. In response, we agree with Vandana Shiva and others who say that these yield increases came at the unsustainable cost of ever-greater additions of agro-chemicals and massive amounts of irrigation. Great chains of dependency were created for farmers—and for society as a whole—in the process, while genetic modifications only deepen these dependencies further.

Humanity in the twenty-first century faces the profound challenge of forging a path to true sustainability. This means learning to understand and respect the ecological boundaries established by our collective home, the Earth. It also means addressing and eradicating the gross inequalities that at present we tolerate in so many spheres of social life. This will require abandoning the goal of ceaseless growth and production and replacing it with a different social purpose, based on a vision of a life lived in harmony, with each other and with the Earth. This is captured by the emerging pan-Indigenous concept of *buenvivir*: living well. Food sovereignty is an essential pillar of *buenvivir*, and it is showing the way to a fair and sustainable future. **■**

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