Sustainable Living: Stimulating the economy and our appetites

by Shawn_Dell_Joyce

"Hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food but a scarcity of democracy." â€” Frances Moore Lappe

Only three companies control 90 percent of the world's grain: Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill and Bunge. One corporation, Monsanto, owns the patents to many of the world's food crops. In the past 50 years, we have witnessed the consolidation of our most precious food sources into a few hands, which has resulted in massive world hunger and environmental degradation.

This typical school lunch consists primarily of processed foods. If our food system were localized and school lunches came from local farms, our children, communities and economy would be healthier. This radical consolidation has resulted in fewer and fewer farmers feeding more and more people. Our government subsidizes cheap corn and soy to the point where no other farmers in the world can compete with our prices. As a result, small farms are put out of business and food security is destabilized across the planet.

In our country, we sacrifice our health and the health of our soils at the altar of cheap grains. Growing that grain requires environmentally devastating chemical inputs and farming methods that decrease soil fertility. All that subsidized corn winds up in almost every processed food and beverage in our diet, making us fatter and unhealthier. What's worse, we are feeding our kids the surplus of this processed food, through the National School Lunch Program.

In a recent New York Times editorial, Alice Waters, a famous chef and local foods advocate, and Katrina Heron point out that for every meal our public schools serve, they get money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which "pays good money for what are essentially leftovers from big American food producers." The duo admits that it would cost "about $5 per child" to feed 30 million schoolchildren organic, locally grown meals, but the long-term benefits, they say, would be worth it.

Those benefits include improving children's dietary habits, tracking food safety more easily, and improving children's attention spans. Probably the greatest benefit would be that the money diverted from big food processors would go instead to local farmers, thus improving the economies of the schools' communities.

We need to overhaul our food system now, as part of the stimulus package. Shifting from a global food system to local food systems would solve many problems at once. People would have access to fresh, varied local produce, and communities would benefit from the economic stimulus generated by keeping food money in their local economies.

British researchers have shown that $2 spent at a local farm has twice the economic impact in the farmer's community than the same $2 spent at a chain grocery. The reason is simple; that local farmer tends to buy local goods, use a local bank, and advertise locally, which keeps that $2 transacting through many other local hands. Chain stores tend to funnel money out of local economies and into their corporate headquarters.

If we stopped defining U.S. citizens as consumers and instead defined food as a basic human right, we could end hunger and the worst effects of poverty in our country. It has been done in other places.

In her book "Hope's Edge," Frances Moore Lappe writes about ending hunger in Brazil's fourth-largest city, Belo Horizonte. In this city of 2.5 million people, 11 percent of the population lived in poverty, with 20 percent of the children going hungry. In 1993, they declared food a right of citizenship and eradicated hunger by:

â€”Creating a food council â€” a city agency consisting of labor, citizen, business and church representatives â€” to design and advise a new food system.

â€”Weaving together the interests of farmers and consumers by offering small farms the choicest spots in urban settings to sell their produce. Farmers make a higher profit; consumers get fresh produce.

â€”Subsidizing healthy foods so that all may be guaranteed fresh, wholesome foods at low prices rather than

cheap processed and sweetened foods.

â€”Setting market prices on essential foods so that all can afford the basics.

â€”Creating local-food restaurants so that farmers have standing accounts and people get fresh local meals at prices competitive with fast-food chains.

â€”Integrating local foods into school lunch programs so that children are guaranteed at least one healthy meal of fresh food each day.

This program costs about $10 million annually, or about 2 percent of Belo Horizonte's budget, which equals about a penny a day per person, notes Lappe. But it provides "food with dignity"; the poorest do not suffer the indignity of starvation, and the farmers do not suffer the indignity of going broke trying to feed the country.

"I knew we had so much hunger in the world," said a Belo Horizonte resident to Lappe. "What is so upsetting, what I didn't know when I started this is it's so easy to end it."

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