

Food Sovereignty: the Civil Rights Movement of our Time

A hungry child in a ragged dress stands on a trash heap in Haiti – this recent front-page photo offers a heart-rending symbol of our failed global food system, where skyrocketing prices have plunged millions more into hunger. Juxtaposed in my mind's eye are images of an obese fast-food customer, family farmers driven from their land, and the overflowing coffers of transnational food corporations. The headline should read: *Greed-based global food system makes world sick and hungry, as profits soar.*

How did we get to this shameful state? There was a time when the Haitian girl could have eaten nutritious rice grown in her own country. That was before US corporate growers, subsidized with our tax dollars, dumped cheap rice in Haiti, putting local rice farmers out of business and leaving Haitians dependent on foreign corporations for food, no matter the price or quality. To add to the misery, the rice coming from the US lacks the nutritional value of the whole-grain native crop. An epidemic of Beriberi in Haitian prisons was traced back to US rice, processed in a way that removes vitamin B. Even US foreign aid adds to the problem by distributing food produced by US corporations, rather than purchasing from local farmers to strengthen their capacity to feed their own. Around the globe, food riots by hungry people, left vulnerable to the price fluctuations of an increasingly unstable global marketplace, demonstrate the misguided strategy of dependency on foreign corporations to deliver basic needs.

White Dog's International Sister Restaurant Program, "Table for Six Billion, Please," envisions a world where every person has enough to eat and a place at the table in making the political and economic decisions that govern their lives. Begun in 1986 (when it was Table for Five Billion), our program has led groups of White Dog customers and staff on international trips to gain an understanding of the effects of US foreign policy on others. In Chiapas, Mexico, we learned how the Zapatista Indians revolted on the day NAFTA went into effect in 1994, demanding their right to farm the land, and predicting that opening the border to US subsidized corn would bankrupt local farmers. Since then, thousands of Mexican farmers have been forced off their land, migrating north in search of work, as cheap US corn flooded the market, including GMO, which threatens the integrity of ancient native varieties. Now that US corn has been diverted to bio-fuel, the cost of tortillas has doubled.

On White Dog trips to Cuba, we witnessed a different outcome. Most of Cuba was once planted in export crops benefiting large corporations and wealthy landowners, while food for domestic consumption was largely imported - primarily from the US. After the revolution and the consequent US embargo, Cuba became dependent on the USSR until their collapse. Faced with the possibility of widespread hunger, Cubans joined together to build a self-reliant local food system, based largely on a network of community gardens. On our tour, Mark Dornstreich of Branch Creek Farm, a supplier of the White Dog, marveled at the advanced organic methods in Havana's urban farms. While farmers around the world despair over accelerating costs of petroleum-based chemical fertilizers and pesticides, another form of corporate dependency, Cubans have developed organic farming practices that protect their soil and water while supplying healthy food. Though not a perfect country, Cuba has achieved food sovereignty –freedom to grow their food in ways most beneficial to their people, while greatly reducing, if not eliminating, dependency on oil for production and transport.

Like others lacking food sovereignty, ordinary Americans have little or no control over the price or quality of our food supply, nor the practices used to produce it. Corporate subsidies have made unhealthy food, high in sugar and fat, more accessible than fresh fruits and vegetables, causing an epidemic of obesity and diabetes. Subsidized corn provides high fructose corn syrup used as sweetener in fast foods, especially soda. Subsidized grain feeds animals in crowded, window-less factories, which produce cheap meat and poultry laden with unhealthy fat, anti-biotics and hormones, and lacking the nutritional value of naturally raised grass-fed and pastured animal products. A recent report by the PEW Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, www.ncifap.org, calls for the phasing out of concentrated animal factories because of the harm to human health, the environment, rural communities, and the lives of farm animals, who suffer a lifetime of cruelty and deprivation.

Philadelphians need a plan to achieve food sovereignty - to gain our independence from an unjust and failing global system. Building regional self-reliance is urgent as we face the uncertainties of climate change and rising oil prices. We need state and city economic development strategies that move away from reliance on a system of exports and imports, and toward local control of our food chain from family farms and urban gardens, to locally owned processors, distributors, and retailers. Conscious eaters can use our dollars to strengthen our regional food system, and stop buying processed foods, sodas and factory meat. As active citizens, we can demand policies to save our farmland from sprawl and big box stores, and phase out

animal factories, as PEW recommends and Californians are seeking to do. At the federal level, we need a new Farm Bill that moves billions of dollars a year in corporate subsidies to building local food systems that make fresh organic fruits and vegetables affordable to all citizens. And it's time for an intelligent foreign policy away from military and economic domination to building self-reliance in food, water and energy for every community around the globe - the logical foundation for world peace.

Let's imagine a different photo from the hungry Haitian girl waiting for her food - a future where she's smiling over a meal of locally grown organic grains, vegetables and fruits, seated along with other healthy, happy faces at the Table for Six Billion. And how about the transnational food corporations who claim we need their monocrops, pesticides, fertilizers, GMO seeds, big machines, cruel animal factories, and long distance transport to feed the world? Well, they're no longer in the picture. Turns out we didn't need them after all.