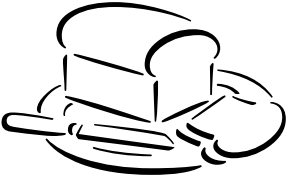


FEATURE ARTICLE



NOT BY BREAD ALONE *Community Food Security*

By Katherine Houston Brown, Ph.D.



BREAD CAN GO a long way to alleviate hunger. Whether in the form of an actual loaf, in reference to

food in general, or as cash (its slang usage), “bread” undeniably helps. Hungry people need food. To buy food, we need cash. By drawing attention to the interdependent nature of our food system, community food security policies and programs envision a more sustainable future where “bread” in all its meanings is more equitably available and accessible. And regarding food in particular, CFS proponents work to ensure that it is safe, affordable, nutritious and culturally acceptable.

Community food security (CFS) combines concern and advocacy for sustainable

agricultural practices, local economic development, and anti-hunger interventions in order to re-weave the fabric of our current food system. The food system refers to the complex web of relationships involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of food—in short, everything involved with food “from seed to table.”

At the heart of the issues taken up by the community food security movement lies a number of current distortions in our food system’s relationships—between people, and between people and nature. Recognizing such interdependence, CFS activists are calling for a mending, a great re-weaving of the torn fabric of our food system so that it is wholly dependable for all.

WHAT’S WRONG?

The unraveling seams of the food system are readily apparent to anyone engaged in reform:

- The prospect of huge profits drives much of the production and distribution of food in this country, and around the world. Consequently, entrenched global economic interests define a large portion of what gets to our nation’s plate, and how.
- Expensive advertising titillates our senses to crave food that is not necessarily good for our health. Nor is it the best food value for our pocketbooks; that’s the point when suppliers (and their

investors) care more about getting a share of the family budget than ensuring the family’s nutrition.

- Food safety is compromised when production involves such great volume that safeguards inevitably fall to the wayside and shortcuts are taken to meet impossible deadlines, and/or when oversight agencies are ineffective.
- Our meats are too often tainted by the immeasurable harm experienced by humans, animals, poultry, fish, and the environment from inhumane industrialized husbandry and slaughtering practices.
- Our nation’s dependency on dangerous chemical agricultural additives—fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides—poisons our fields, water supplies, insects and birds, as well as the people who work the soil, communities nearby, and ultimately all consumers who eat food grown this way.
- Even more insidious, these chemicals mask the degeneration of our soils’ fertility, while accompanying practices of cultivation and harvest erode enormous quantities of soil itself. Silt-laden run-off, much of it polluted by agrichemicals, endangers aquaculture (fish, mollusks, etc.) by clogging our lakes, rivers, and ocean estuaries.
- As Eric Schlosser so compellingly details in his recent exposé, *Fast Food Nation* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), the alluring mix of corporate earnings, instant convenience, and franchised pre-processed recipes converge with the realities of exploitative labor and environmental practices, and questionable food quality when we buy most over-the-counter meals. There is a ready market for this food however, given a home-front too busy, too estranged to set the dinner table and where the shared know-how to cook a meal is being lost. The result? Among them, Chef Tom French of the Chef’s Alliance says, is “a dumbing down of our taste palates.” (personal communication, 2001)
- Nation-wide on average, food travels the equivalent distance of more than half the continent, using non-renewable and pol-

Hunger in the United States

Twelve million children in the United States are food insecure—meaning that their caregivers haven’t the means to put ample portions of nutritious food on the table everyday. Thirty-one million households (or 10% of all households) are food insecure. (*A Millennium Free from Hunger 2000*, U.S. National Progress Report on Implementation of the U.S. Action Plan on Food Security and the World Food Summit Commitments, p. 2.) Cash may be in short supply, supermarkets too far to access, or life too disrupted by any number of problems—usually although not always, these disruptions are rooted in poverty.

Anti-hunger programs and dedicated individuals provide tons of emergency and supplementary food through pantries, shelters, soup kitchens, daycares and school cafeterias. And still, everyday the need outweighs the supply. More than 23.3 million people sought food assistance in 2001, up 2 million since 1997. (America’s Second Harvest report, *Hunger in America 2001*.) Vouchers, food stamps, and cash benefits can also provide significant relief. Because our nation does not support the understanding that food is a right, we have no unified response to hunger, and everyday people turn to these crucial safety nets, already mightily stretched. CSF includes the work of food charity, and seeks to alleviate the systemic causes of hunger and food insecurity.

luting resources, before it reaches our mouths. This distance only grows as farms are paved under suburban development and we import more and more of our food from other countries. The long term costs to nutritional health, family and community well-being, and the environment, here and abroad, are massively damaging.

- Mono-cropping continues to threaten the existence of plant diversity, and as we loose more and more species and strains from neglect and interbreeding, our agricultural fields are increasingly vulnerable to massive crop failures.
- Added to the public's existing fears and suspicions about the known and as-yet unknown deleterious side-effects created by GMO food is the prospect of bioterrorism, the purposeful introduction of pathogens into our food system by enemies of the state. (see *The Newsletter of CCOF*, Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 22., Winter 2001 issue.)

UNITY IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGE

In the context of these challenges, community food security is gaining a wellspring of momentum. This is undoubtedly because the movement has relevance for all eaters. Consequently CFS includes individuals and agencies who have long struggled on behalf of people who are hungry. While the issue of justice pertains most immediately to families needing basic nutritional requirements, everyone in society shares a common dependency on a reliable food system. This means that the broadcloth banner of CFS is stitched together by farmers, processors, wholesalers, retailers, policy makers, researchers, educators, as well as anti-hunger advocates and consumers.

About the Author

Katherine Brown is an applied anthropologist, writer, and artist. She founded *City Sprouts*, a community-based urban agriculture project in Omaha, Nebraska, and consults widely on related issues.

The concept of community has been a unifying factor for the movement. Executive director of Connecticut's Hartford Food System and a key innovator in shaping national food policies, Mark Winne explains, "Attaching the word 'community' does two things. It conceptualizes the idea

"The problem is not one of production, but access and distribution."

Anuradha Mittal
Co-Director, Food First

of people and groups with different interests working together toward the common goal of food security. Secondly, and more practically, the word defines a place—the community—where this activity happens. We wanted to localize the efforts that ensured everyone was food secure. CFS projects are thus designed to increase local food self-reliance, such as farmland preservation, community gardens, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) projects, and cooperatives." (personal communication, 2001)

Furthermore, by localizing concerns about food security, a face is given to the relationships that support a sustainable food system, and thereby accountability and trust can grow between players. People understandably feel more secure knowing the sources of their food, knowing that care was taken on behalf of nature and field-workers in raising their food. Though backyard and community gardeners can rely on their own home-grown produce, not everyone can and will grow what they need to feed themselves over a year. Most city dwellers are constrained by space and ordinances from raising animals for food. So the relationships between consumers and growers made possible by regionally-oriented farmers' markets, restaurants, CSAs, groceries, and institutions go a long way to repair the anonymous and disconnected transactions that characterize so much of our food system.

WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

Community food security cultivates mutual awareness of what is needed for consumers' and growers' well-being. Robert Gottlieb and Andy Fisher have observed that "Promoting local agriculture is key to building better links between farmers and

WIC at the Farmers' Market

By Shoshana Boek

WIC is a supplemental nutrition program whereby food

vouchers are supplied to pregnant, breast-feeding, and postpartum women, and infants and children less than five years old. WIC also provides nutrition counseling, nutrition classes, and assistance with breastfeeding questions. The foods provided supply adequate amounts of protein, calcium, iron, and Vitamins A and C. During the summer months, farmers' market vouchers are given out. These vouchers allow any participant to buy free fruits and vegetables at the market.

For summer 2000, the WIC program of Mendocino County applied and received a small grant through Project Lean. Two WIC employees went to the local farmers' market once a week and prepared food demonstrations. We offered samples of recipes as well as copies to all farmers' market customers. All the recipes prepared included produce that was available at the market. Some of the food demonstrations included: strawberry-mango salsa, tabouli salad, fresh basil, tomato and mozzarella salad, fruit smoothies and fruit salad. Our goal was to provide WIC participants as well as the general public with innovative, quick and easy recipes that could be prepared at home using produce available at the farmers' market. Our intent was to encourage people to eat a minimum of five servings of fresh fruits and vegetables daily.

We found that our food demonstrations proved successful. WIC clients, when asked, were more inclined to use their farmers' market vouchers after seeing the demonstrations, and their fruit and vegetable consumption also increased.

More information about WIC and farmers' markets can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/wic/menu/new/new.htm

Web Resources

- USDA Community Food Security Initiative. www.reeusda.gov/food_security/foodshp.htm (link to the Community Food Project Program, an innovative \$16 million grants program started in 1996 to help low income communities meet their food needs while building self-reliance.)
- The Hartford Food System. A Guide to Developing Community Food Programs. www.hartfordfood.org
- America's Second Harvest. www.secondharvest.org
- Chefs Alliance for Social Action and Sustainable Agriculture. www.tableauinc.com/page15.html
- A Citizen's Guide to Food Recovery (gleaning). www.fns.usda.gov/FNS/MENU/GLEANING/SUPPORT/CitzGuide/Four.HTM
- World Hunger Year. Challenging Hunger and Poverty. www.worldhungeryear.org
- Food First. www.foodfirst.org
- Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources. www.csacenter.org
- SUSTAIN. The Alliance for Better Food and Farming (England). www.sustainweb.org
- Plant A Row for the Hungry. The Garden Writers Association of America. www.gwaa.org/par/organize.html
- From Farm to Table: Making the Connection in the Mid-Atlantic Food System. Matthew Hora and Jody Tick from the Capital Area Food Bank. 202-526-5344 www.clagettfarm.org/introforeward.html

consumers and gaining greater consumer knowledge and concern about their food source." (*Race, Poverty, and the Environment*. 7(2):19, 2000) Each time we purchase food we can forcefully affirm our commitment to promoting a sustainable food system. We support local growers when we buy at farmers' markets, invest in CSAs, and ask grocers, chefs, hospitals and schools to carry and serve local sustainably-produced food.

This kind of "pocketbook politics" has an impact. When local growers are given increased market share, economic development of the community at large is enhanced. Modeling her recommendations on successful biosystems, visionary Jane Jacobs explains in *The Nature of Economies* (Vintage Canada, 2001), that human economies too are strengthened when they rely more on local resources and depend less on imports. This may seem like common sense to CCOF members. However, the economic potential of local food production and consumption is too often overlooked by economic planners and policy-makers, and we end up with unsustainable downward spirals of extraction, export and import processes that drain natural resources, food, and wealth from communities.

Ken Meter and Jon Rosales' report on Minnesota farming, *Finding Food in Farm Country* (www.igc.org/crossroads/ff.pdf) carefully documents this trend. In 1997, "\$866 million worth of food was produced [\$80 million less than it cost to grow it!...] most of that food went elsewhere, out of the region, and area residents spent \$506 million buying food, only \$2 million directly from farmers." (*Growing for Market*. 10(10): 8, 2001)

Consumer choice requires access to local products and the cash to afford them. Both of these can be problematic, but not insur-

mountable obstacles. Sometimes what gets in the way is an irrational frugality that motivates someone to by-pass local wares because they cost just pennies more than imported items. But which is the better deal for one's immediate gain, and for overall food security? The answer is increasingly obvious. In my grocery store last month, I could choose between imported conventional lettuce at \$1.29 a head or organic, locally grown lettuce for \$1.49. Twenty cents could buy a world of difference in freshness and nutritional value, plus provide me effortlessly with a sense of contribution to my community and the environment.

When the difference in price is not pennies, or when shoppers are truly strapped for funds, the choice to purchase locally produced food can be supported by a num-

"At this turning point in our relationship with Earth, we work for an evolution: from dominance to partnership; from fragmentation to connection; from insecurity to interdependence."

David Suzuki Foundation
Declaration of Interdependence

ber of creative strategies. The USDA-administered Community Food Project grants program has enabled numerous low-income communities to foster local food security and economic development through such innovative alternatives. For example, start-up grants have helped to establish community-based food processing kitchens for preserving bulk produce—for home use and micro-enterprise development; buying clubs and consumer cooperatives; gleaning programs; and the conversion of blighted land in cities into gardens.

Many farmers have done their part too, including donating excess produce to shelters, growing extra for food banks, and starting farmers' markets in inner-city neighborhoods.

The Community Food Security Coalition, widely recognized as a leader in the movement, advocates several policy initiatives that would broaden even further the capacity for local food self-reliance in vulnerable communities. Among their policy



recommendations are Local Food Bonus Accounts for institutions serving low and moderate in-come households that purchase locally produced food (an expansion of the Small Farms/School Meals Program that links farmers with school meal programs) and procedures to ensure that minority and family farmers gain fair access to government services and programs.

A TAPESTRY OF INTERDEPENDENCE
Community food security concepts, programs, and policies are creating opportunities for eaters to engage more fully in value-centered living. By integrating the goals of sustainable agriculture, environmentalism, and social justice, the far-reaching



▲ Happy Boy Farms ▼



perspective of CFS places our food choices in line with commitments that honor the interconnectedness of all life forms. It is amazing that such a lofty goal can be attained each time we lift a fork to feed ourselves! And it is outrageous that so many obstacles stand in our way.

Organic farmers and consumers of their products are “naturals” in the CFS movement. Indeed, much of the philosophy of CFS is informed by organic theory and practice. We can feel deep gratification knowing that we are irreplaceable threads in the warp and weft of an evolving movement to create the kind of food system that works for people and with nature. 

Community Food Security Technical Assistance and Funding Resources

Center for Food and Justice, Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College, Maggie Masch, MPH, RD, Associate Director, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles, CA 90041.

Tel: (323) 341-5096; Fax: (323) 258-2917; e-mail: mhmasch@oxy.edu web: www.uepi.oxy.edu/cfj

Food Security Community Development and Public Policy Program, University of California, Div. of Agriculture & Natural Resources, Cooperative Extension-Alameda County, Sheila Bliss Duffy, Ph.D., Food Systems Analyst, 1131 Harbor Bay Parkway, Suite 131, Alameda, CA 94502. Tel: (510) 383-1708; Fax: (510) 567-6813; e-mail: sbduffy@ucdavis.edu

Community Food Security Coalition, P.O. Box 209, Venice, CA 90294. Tel: (310) 822-5410; Fax: (310) 822-1440; e-mail: andy@foodsecurity.org, web: www.foodsecurity.org

California Nutrition Network Food Security Grants, California Department of Health Services, 601 N. 7th Street, P.O. Box 942732, MS-662, Sacramento, CA 94234-7320. Tel: (916) 445-1305; Fax: (916) 323-1835; e-mail: FBuck@dhs.ca.gov; web: www.dhs.cahwnet.gov/cpns/funding_fund_food.htm

Center for Eco-Literacy, 2522 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94702. Tel: (510) 845-4595; Fax: (510) 845-1439; web: www.ecoliteracy.org

Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program, United States Department of Agriculture, Liz Tuckermanty, USDA/REE/CSREES Program Director. Tel: (202) 205-0241; e-mail: etuckermanty@reeusda.gov web: www.reeusda.gov/crgam/cfp/community.htm

Community Alliance with Family Farmers, 36355 Russell Blvd., Davis, California, 95616-9495 or P.O. Box 363, Davis, CA 95617. Tel: (530) 756-8518; Fax: (530) 756-7857; web: www.caff.org

University of California Small Farm Center, DANR Building, Room 185, Hopkins Rd., One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616-8699. Tel: (530) 752-8136; Fax: (530) 752-7716; e-mail: sfcenter@ucdavis.edu web: www.sfc.ucdavis.edu



The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC)

Contact: Andy Fisher, Executive Director. 310-822-5410. www.foodsecurity.org

Founded in 1994, CFSC is a North American alliance of over 275 grassroots organizations, providing a comprehensive blend of training, technical assistance, networking, publications, and advocacy to promote community-based food systems that are environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially just.