

From Food Miles to Food Sovereignty | Joel Catchlove, Friends of the Earth Adelaide
Reclaim the Food Chain Forum | Monday 3 December | Sarah's Café, Adelaide

Earlier this year I had the privilege of being invited to attend the first World Forum for Food Sovereignty in Mali, West Africa.

Two thirds of Mali is the Sahara desert, yet Mali is a country that may run counter to many associations we may have about African countries. Historically, it has always been self-sufficient in food. It hosted one of the world's first universities, in Timbuktu, and it was once a centre of global trade.

So it was here, on the dusty shores of Lake Selingue in Mali's southwest, amid local fishing and farming communities that the World Forum for Food Sovereignty was conducted. The Forum drew together over 600 farmers, peasants, fisherfolk, nomads, shepherds, indigenous peoples, forest peoples, and gardeners from across the world to discuss and develop the emerging concept of Food Sovereignty.

Food Sovereignty emerged out of a realisation that the concept of food security was increasingly being appropriated by corporate globalisation. While food security itself is a good concept – that all people should have access to food, in 1996, the global peasant network La Via Campesina observed that while food security may guarantee food on the table, it need not guarantee a whole swag of other things: that the food was sustainably produced, that the farmer received a fair price, that it's healthy or culturally appropriate; or indeed, as food security became a justification for more global trade, there was increasing doubt that food security itself could be secure any longer when dependent on the vagaries of the global market.

So, in response the concept of Food Sovereignty was coined. At its core, food sovereignty is about community self-determination. It might sound like an obvious thing, but in the context of our current global trade system, where corporations and International Financial Institutions like the World Bank or the World Trade Organisation seek to dictate policy, it's radical. Food Sovereignty insists that communities have the right to determine their own food policies: what they will grow, how it will be grown – that is, that they have the right to grow things sustainably without depleting their own environments, rather than being forced into industrial scale agriculture – and also that they should be able to determine the terms of trade, to ensure they receive a fair and sustaining price. It's important to note, that food sovereignty is not anti-trade, but rather for trade that ensures that community needs are not undermined.

The bulk of the delegates to the Forum were from Latin America, Africa and Asia. There were a few from North America and Europe, and I was the only delegate from all of Oceania. For many of the delegates, their model of sustainable food and agriculture is already in place. Many come from communities with strong food traditions that have been feeding their families and communities sustainably for hundreds or even thousands of years. For many of the farmers I spoke to, their challenge is to protect their way of life and traditions from a global system that's working to turn it all upside down.

Australia

In Australia, I think we're at a different point in the spectrum. The oldest Indigenous food traditions in Australia, those that developed over time within the unique limits of the continent's environments, have in many cases been written over or erased by colonisation.

In its place, we have agriculture based on a model transplanted from Europe and North America. While we have some examples of food production that does respect the uniqueness of our environment – some of the people in this room are responsible for some amazing examples of sustainability – I think we can agree that Australian agriculture is still a work in progress. We only need to look at the Murray to see that we are still learning the limits and demands of Australia's environment, and perhaps not quickly enough.

As a colony, I wonder as well whether our transition from a colonial economy to absorption into the corporate global economy was so smooth as to be almost invisible. One of the trademarks of corporatisation is concentration – 70-80 percent of the world's grain trade is controlled by just 2 corporations. We see similar trends in Australia, where the amount of farms is continually shrinking while the scale of those remaining grows: 60 % of our food comes from 10 % of our farms. In food retailing, concentration is even more pronounced, with almost 80% of food purchases passing through the cash registers of Coles and Woolworths.

Corporate Global Food

A concentrated corporate food system is problematic. Food now travels along a long and increasingly anonymous supply chain from farm to fork. As consumers, we can know little to nothing about how or where the food we eat was produced. It's easy to forget that, as American farmer and writer Wendell Berry says, that "eating is an agricultural act," that ends the "annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth".

A global supply chain can bring serious health issues: look at the spread of Mad Cow's Disease and avian flu, and the regular food scares from the last few months: seafood exported globally from China was found to be contaminated with industrial chemicals, and a string of *e. coli* contaminations in the US resulted in the dumping of millions of kilograms of ground beef.

Corporate consolidation brings inefficiencies. There's the classic example of mangoes grown in Darwin having to be trucked to a distribution centre in Adelaide so they can be trucked back to supermarkets in Darwin. In fact, a recent study from CERES in Melbourne found that the average household food basket of 29 items could have travelled up to 70,803km. That's almost twice around the circumference of the earth; with an average distance of almost 2,500km per item.

Furthermore, some transport sees more energy consumed in the form of non-renewable fossil fuels than the food itself contains. A British study showed 127 calories were consumed in transport for every calorie contained in an iceberg lettuce jetted from LA to the UK. Bizarrely, we can also see a global trade system where countries seem to swap food – exporting and importing similar quantities of the same product, simultaneously.

The corporate food system is a system of inequity. Global trends show that the bulk of food profits concentrate in the bank accounts of a handful of corporate middlemen and traders, while those that carry the greatest risk in this whole enterprise, the farmers and food producers, struggle to make ends meet.

In contrast, eating locally completely bypasses the long and anonymous global supply chain to build direct relationships with farmers and producers. Studies show that money spent locally continues to cycle through the community, rather than being siphoned off to a distant company headquarters.

By eating locally, we draw our food choices back into our own sphere of influence. Eating locally reconnects us with our food, the land it comes from and the people that grow it. Beneath all this, eating locally also carries an aspect of 'reinhabitation', of learning the unique characteristics and limits of our home environments, so we can begin to understand how to live within our means.

Reclaim the Food Chain

So, it's in this context that in June of this year, Friends of the Earth initiated its sustainable food and agriculture campaign, 'Reclaim the Food Chain'. Inspired by the global food sovereignty movement, Reclaim the Food Chain works to offer perspectives on broad issues of global trade and agriculture policy, as well as supporting practical, hands-dirty community food production. Through our work, we hope to build on the work of many of the fine organisations and community projects that already exist in Adelaide.

In November, with the Goodwood Goodfood Co-op we initiated the Urban Orchard, a monthly homegrown fruit and vegetable exchange that allows household, community and school gardens to

exchange their surplus produce. The Urban Orchard sees a brisk trade in seeds, seedlings, fruit, vegetables and herbs, and as the suburban summer harvest kicks in, we also hope to see skill sharing and workshops according to the month's surplus. When we have oranges, we'll have marmalade workshops and when we have olives, we'll share skills on preserving.

We are still navigating the shape of our food system. Our voyage of discovery continues this festive season with the Local Food Feast. Participants from across Australia and the Pacific have already committed to trying to eat local for all or part of the period from December 24 to January 1 as a way of learning through experience where our food comes from. It also offers us an opportunity to practise conscious consumption at a time associated with mass consumerism. The experiences, ideas, recipes and stories of the participants will all be shared online and possibly published. In preparation, a number of the members of the group have been working on compiling a directory of local food producers and processors that will be available soon. We invite you to join us!

If you want to find out more about getting involved in the Local Food Feast or would like to chat more about anything I've mentioned, you can register your interest or get more information on the stall, or feel free to chat with me or anyone else from the group.