

Why produce food? Shifting motivations

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ABSTRACT: Many premodern food production systems were developed to meet the needs of the local community. With little distance between food producers and consumers, they were more likely to be concerned about each other's well-being. In contrast, with modern industrialized food production, whether on farms or in factories, producers don't know consumers at all. Food production is driven more by the pursuit of private wealth than by concerns about public health and well-being. There is a need to find the right mix between the industrial and community-based approaches.

KEYWORDS: Food systems, food security, malnutrition, community, caring

Community-based food production is likely to be motivated at least partly by caring about local people's well-being, including their nutrition status. The shift toward industrialization of food production increased the distance between producers and consumers. Producers of food that are shipped far away are not connected with the consumers. This is well illustrated in the history of islands (Kent 2015). In pre-contact Hawaii, food was abundant and people were healthy. Taro, the basic staple food, was produced to meet the needs of the community. Then in the 1860s, businessmen came with missionaries from the United States and produced rice for export. There was a large-scale shift from taro to rice production. Links between producers and consumers disappeared, and the distinction between farming for nutrition and farming for money became clear. The people whose taro supply was threatened did not benefit from rice exports.

In any place, premodern food systems serve to meet local food needs. If the motivation for food production shifts to making money, there is no satiation, no fulfillment of a goal -- for the owners, more money is always better. The shift of the motivation from meeting community food needs to producing private wealth with no limits has been global in scope (UNCTAD 2013).

Local community-based food systems still function in much of the world. These premodern forms of agriculture are alive and doing well in many parts of the world, but they get little attention. Their effectiveness in providing good food supplies has been well documented (FAO and Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT 2021; Inter Pares 2004). However, these time-tested modes of food production are steadily losing ground, displaced by industrial food production.

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CULTIVATING CARING

In a project on hunger in Scotland, the core message was, “Food is about community and not just consumption” and “Projects which aim to build community around food often help to create the feeling of a place where people choose to go, rather than have to.” The project “uses music and surplus food to bring people together to catalyze the energy of communities across Ayrshire. People from across each area, of all ages and backgrounds, come together to sing, to cook, to play, to share advice or to just talk.” (Independent Working Group on Food Poverty, 2016, pp; 13-14, 34). The program helps needy people in a way that respects their dignity.

In modern industrial food systems, producers and consumers are separated not only by distance but also by layers of wholesalers, processors, and investors, each with their own interests in the food system. Where there is close interaction between producers and consumers, people are likely to shift away from exploitation and indifference and instead move toward more concern about one another’s well-being.

Caring about one’s neighbors can be intentionally cultivated by facilitating community members spending more time working and playing together. That would reduce the likelihood of anyone in the community going hungry, even where there is no program for that purpose (Kent, 2016). Communities can be organized in ways that facilitate positive social interaction, limiting exploitation and indifference. Community-level food projects can facilitate people’s being together, and in that way, support their caring.

There are many options for food-related interactions. People could garden together, cook together, and eat together. Food-related skills could be strengthened through the sharing of knowledge and hands-on experience. People who are facing difficulties could be offered food packages or meals and could also be given support in learning how to grow food, shop better, and cook for themselves. Community farms could raise food products mainly to meet their own needs, and at the same time produce some products for sale outside the community (Sanz-Cañaa, 2016).

For isolated individuals and families, having someone to eat with may be nearly as important as having something to eat (Independent Working Group on Food Poverty 2016, 35). Brazil’s dietary guidelines recommend, “Eat in company whenever possible” (Tsai 2016). Guiding principles like these relating to the social aspects of local food systems should be articulated and implemented under the leadership of the local community. Communities can learn from each other, but still retain their diversity as they attend to their community’s concerns.

Perhaps the world can be transformed in incremental steps, with some successes and some failures along the way. Successful small projects should be studied. For example, in some places widespread poverty might be addressed by finding bits of underutilized land and building a small farm, a shop, and a restaurant along with apartments and play spaces. Perhaps the best way to reduce the need for feeding the poor is to give them good opportunities to provide for themselves. The long-term objective should not be a about doing charity better, but about making charity unnecessary.

Should food systems be community-oriented or industrial? That is not a good question. There is no need for a global choice between community-based and commerce-based food systems. It would be wiser to settle for a mixture of both. Allow for a variety of answers in different places and insist on effective management and regulation to minimize the risks of harm.

Community-based and industrial food production each have advantages and disadvantages. When analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches, it is important to recognize that persistent hunger benefits some people. Perhaps the most important component of this is that sustained poverty ensures a steady supply of cheap labor (Kent 2009). For many different reasons, good and bad, both approaches have strong advocates. Both types of food systems should be available and well managed, with special attention given to people who are needy.

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