

Communities Reclaiming Their Food System Organic Agriculture in the Front Lines

There is a beginning of a groundswell of concern for the health of the environment and all inhabitants of our little blue planet ... our Mother Earth. You can feel it. Change is in the air. I believe we are on the cusp of a massive shift in the way we, in western countries view the world and the way we live in it. And we had better make it happen fast or the backlash from nature and our third world sisters and brothers will be furious.

The title of this article is "Communities Reclaiming Their Food System", but if we are to have any hope of doing that, we must first understand that the difficulties people face securing a safe, nutritious, and adequate food supply are symptoms of a larger problem. A problem rooted in a faulty human decision making process. Unless we take steps to address this fundamental flaw, we will be forever doomed to addressing only symptoms, not root causes, in our problem solving efforts. Look no further than the last green revolution, to see how conventional decision making has only compounded our problems. What we have been doing is not working. We have found ourselves stuck in a hole, and our response has been to dig even harder, using technology to try and solve non-technological problems.

Although I am an organic farmer and want to talk about the role of Saskatchewan organic farmers in securing our food supply, I should say I'm also an aspiring Holistic Manager and some of my views come from that perspective.

Allen Savory, a founder of the Holistic Management movement, says environmental degradation and loss of bio-diversity, is caused by a flawed human decision making process. The result is poverty and food insecurity, social breakdown and violence. Good decisions according to him, are only possible when all the people, the stake holders being affected by a particular decision, make that decision based on a goal they form collectively. To be sustainable, the common goal that the stake holders form has to be environmentally and socially, as well as, economically sound. Economic profit is only one of the three components that have to be kept in balance. Sustainability is like a three legged stool standing on these pillars of good decision making, whether you are talking about individuals, small groups, or entire nations.

It seems to me that we are presently experiencing a crises in the way we humans govern ourselves. Democracy doesn't seem to be working. We have governance that ignores the three pillars of good decision making ... the social, environmental, and economic soundness that I mentioned. And we have governance that at best, only allows the stake holders, citizens, to participate on the fringes in a very superficial way.

The result is we are vulnerable. We are living in times of a violent corporate assault being waged against the worlds' ecology and against humanity. This invasion is as real as that of any jackbooted army. This stampede for profit at any cost continues to erode democracy and has corrupted the role of governments and international trade organizations from acting as instruments of the will of the people, to that of acting as agents and promoters of amoral transnational corporations. The role of universities has been similarly compromised.

One of the worlds' heritage territories now being fought over and carved up is the genetic commons. To the detriment of farmers and the public, patent laws carried in international trade agreements are being used as weapons by the transnationals to stake out claims in a "genetic wild west". Bio-patenting means corporations, not people, will permanently control not only the seeds farmers use, but the very genetic foundation from which our food, and indeed the existence of all life comes.

Although organic farming is not the only answer, it does concern itself with the issues of the health of community, food and the environment. Until now organic farmers have been able to contribute to environmental health and sustainable farming by avoiding some of the pitfalls of globalization. We did this by stepping away to some extent, from the high input treadmill of industrial agriculture. However that option will end when traditional seed stocks are contaminated by genetically engineered varieties released by irresponsible and predatory chemical companies.

Our customers of organic food demand a zero tolerance for GE contamination. However it seems as if a self serving biotechnology industry is deliberately using genetic pollution to ensure organic farmers lose the ability to serve those markets. This may spell the end of certified organic agriculture. And even if you don't eat organic food, GE contamination will mean you will lose your right to eat, or not eat, genetically engineered food. GE contamination will mean that all farmers and communities will be permanently locked into a corporate controlled, industrial style food system. The

alternatives will have been destroyed, even for conventional agriculture. If the transnationals pull this off, it will surely go down as one of history's greatest corporate coups, or scams... depending on how you look at it.

The response of Saskatchewan organic farmers was to launch a class action lawsuit against Monsanto and Aventis in January this year. It seeks compensation for the damage already done to organic farmers by the introduction of genetically engineered canola into the environment; and it calls for an injunction to prevent the introduction of GE wheat. We do this on our own behalf, but we also do it on behalf of the public. We believe this is the opening legal skirmish in a battle for the future of life as we know it on this planet.

Losing canola as a cropping option because of GE contamination was a large blow to Saskatchewan organic producers. But because wheat is the cornerstone of western Canadian agriculture, losing it in the same manner could devastate prairie organic farming.

The "Saskatchewan Organic Directorate", or SOD, is an umbrella organic organization. The SOD sub committee, the "Organic Agriculture Protection Fund" (or OAPF) Committee was set up to coordinate and raise funds for this class action. It also has a mandate to lobby government, and we seek to build a broad alliance of individuals and organizations that share common goals.

The OAPF committee is very aware that this high profile and precedent setting legal action has the potential to raise international public awareness on issues that go beyond the narrow focus of the class action ... issues that are common and crucial to the well being of all farmers, the public and the environment world wide. I believe that Saskatchewan organic farmers are part of an international movement, a community of people that is rising up and saying "no"! "No ... to the corporate agenda and the governments that promote it. We will take charge of our future! Globalization will happen on our terms".

I'll conclude with a couple of thoughts on personal responsibility and power. I've been slagging transnational corporations, but to some extent that's a cop out. Someone has said that corporations exist only at the whim of the public. Corporations are really only an idea that exist in our minds. If we cease to believe in that idea, it loses its power over us. Then it withers and dies as did the Soviet Union when its citizens ceased to believe in it.

There is a dark force at work in our world, but it is one that walks with each one of us. It's insidious and seductive, and it feeds on human fear and greed. It entices us to do things we would not normally do, or to passively accept someone else's agenda, all in the name of security.

Whatever you choose to call it, it tells us to use poison to grow our food. It tells us to turn a Brazilian rain forest into a pile of wood chips and a vast cattle pasture. It tells us to turn our farms into concentration camps for animals. And it tells us to close off our borders to the weak and hungry. As the old cartoon character Pogo said "I have seen the enemy, and it is us".

If Pogo is right though, the beauty and the hope is that each one of us holds the key to change. "We are the ones we have been waiting for". That's what David Korten said at the G6B Peoples' Summit in Calgary this summer. "We are the ones we have been waiting for". Let us hold that thought as we work in our communities and organizations. Let us also hold that thought as we work towards making the changes in our Canadian federal and provincial political systems that will mean better decision making. The security of our food supply, and indeed the very future of our planet depends on it. Some system of proportional representation is long overdue in this country ... not to mention the country south of us.

But maybe change best begins even closer to home. These are a couple of lines of hope and responsibility from Wendell Berry. "The only answer to any of our problems is a way of life that is not corrupt, not violent, not wasteful nor toxic. That calls for a lot of small, mostly personal and local steps that probably have to be taken, ... one at a time".

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