So Where Does Your Food Come From?

Were you fortunate enough to have sufficient food to eat today? Do you know who grew it? How was it grown? Where? How was it packaged, labelled, processed and transported before ending up on your plate? Was it as good for you as it was for the people who sold it to you?

A generation ago we could easily answer these questions. Most of our food was grown by a small farmer down the road. Fruits and veggies were seasonal and fresh, and meat came from real, not factory farms. Food was prepared, not processed. Most importantly we were not just consumers, we were customers.

Today most of us have entirely lost touch with our food. We have shifted from a greengrocer who often used to deliver to our door, a baker down the road and a butcher with a shop in the local high street to a large supermarket, where food revolves around brands, convenience, price and availability.

Quality, taste and freshness have been displaced by utility and instant gratification. Food aisles are swamped with novel processed goods - more than 17 000 new products every year - which our grandparents would struggle to identify, let alone ascertain the ingredients.

Many producers subvert external controls in order to reduce costs. They deny the harmfulness of additives, oppose labelling of GM products and misrepresent what we eat. They will insert ingredients that nobody invited, such as soy "flour" in bread or protein in sausages to reduce cost, while increasing risk.

The world's biggest food companies squeeze suppliers so hard that small farmers at the base of the supply chain often operate at a loss. Cocoa, coffee and tea farmers are exploited, child and slave labour continues, chemical use remains poorly regulated while water abstraction destroys aquifers. Manufacturers could not give a continental as long as customers survive the next meal to buy again. Traders and processors source ingredients as cheaply as possible and sell for the highest possible mark-up. The ruthlessness of the food market undermines its own long-term stability.

Food diversity constantly diminishes, although this is obscured by an apparent cornucopia of products. We rely on four primary sources of starch - maize, rice, wheat and potatoes. Varieties of vegetables continue to shrink. Until recently we knew what variety of potato we bought. Today you take what you can find, unless you know your farmer. So too with beans, carrots, tomatoes and cucumbers, all rendered uniform and bland to fulfil supply chain criteria.

Retailers are engaged in a race to the bottom where customers are doubly compromised. Not only is produce from unidentifiable origins, farmed using unknown quantities of ecologically destructive chemicals and fertilisers, but worse yet, labels obscure instead of informing.

The recent brouhaha in Europe around the mis-labelling of meat products, which contain horse, pork and other culturally sensitive products was recently reprised in South Africa where horse, donkey and water buffalo were identified without suitable labelling. Biltong contained numerous unlabelled animals including giraffe, kangaroo and horse.

While developed nations have fairly sophisticated monitoring and tracking systems, these events - together with those like melamine plastic contamination of Chinese milk products - highlight the extent of dysfunction. The system is regularly undermined by unscrupulous operators.

Contamination of our food will inevitably increase for the following simple reason: International food retailers, in the form of large supermarkets, have developed arms-length relationships with suppliers, processors and manufacturers. Culpability is displaced by retailers' denial of any knowledge of wrongdoing by suppliers. This was precisely the reaction of European supermarkets caught up in the horseburger saga; blame was shifted to unknown suppliers in foreign nations.

What about nations without proper regulation or oversight? Food condemned by strictly managed regimes is easily diverted and dumped in poorly regulated markets. Developing nations are at particular risk.

These threats penetrate directly into the heart of sustainability of the global agricultural system. We know that we produce sufficient food to feed everyone on earth. The problem is that our food has simply become another tradable
commodity.

The two largest commodity crops - maize and soy - are not used or grown as human food. Instead they are primarily used as animal feed - to support an unsustainable meat production system - or diverted into fuels like ethanol and vegetable diesel. Only tiny proportions are used directly as food or converted into ingredients like starch, meat substitute products or the like.

Huge resources are used to produce these crops that could be diverted to crops with far greater human, rather than economic importance. For instance the yield of major vegetable crops is between 10 and 3 times greater per area than soy or maize, with far high nutritional value.

Our food production system is controlled by an ever diminishing number of massive multinationals - 4 main commodity traders, 3 large seed companies (all involved in GMO seed production), manufacturers with very little commitment or credibility as far as interest in environmental or social sustainability is concerned, which supply ever larger supermarket companies. These institutions have effectively taken control of the global food supply with devastating effects on food wholesomeness, availability, sustainability, access and security.

The modern food system is an indivisible part of our dysfunctional economic system which itself totters from one crisis to the next. While we can usually fix or ride out economic perturbations, we will not have that luxury as our obsolete food system smashes the boundaries of ecological limits. Our supplies of cheap and abundant energy, water, land and chemicals are constrained by real physical limits, far more tangible than economic constraints.

So how do we fix this broken system? How can we move away from increasingly unhealthy and un-natural food, which is directly responsible for unprecedented rates of obesity, diabetes, circulatory diseases and cancer, which simultaneously ravages both planet and people?

The overwhelming expert consensus is that in order to begin to fix the problem we must start to shift from large-scale commodity agriculture toward localised, diversified and resilient farming systems. We need to reduce the distance our food travels. We need to reconnect with the source of our food. We don't need slow food as much as smart food. In contrast the present system is incredibly stupid on all counts except that of extracting profit.

The risks of failure to fix our broken food system increase with time. We cannot continue to poison the earth, to ignore soil erosion, to create massive dead zones in our oceans from agricultural nutrient runoff. We cannot continue to tap into diminishing aquifers without serious consequences, all while producing empty calories and dysfunctional food. Our present system profits from exploiting and externalising the costs of using non-renewable resources. Experts estimate we have as little as a few decades left before our food system collapses.

We know that we can feed the world by shifting human food production toward localised, sustainable, diverse, smart farming systems. While this may entail some changes in how we eat and shop, it is critically important to initiate a planned transition in order to initiate these changes without creating systemic shocks and instability within the food chain.

It is foolish to think that we can continue to feed the world by following an ecologically and economically bankrupt production model. The damage wrought on the planet is mirrored in the damage on our health. We really need to turn onto the smart path.

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