

Food First BACKGROUNDER

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The New Year saw renewed food riots in India and Africa, and record levels of hunger here in the US. This year also saw transformation in the food movement, with new power and national recognition. The food movement has successfully shone the spotlight on hunger and food access in the US, created a drive for more local food, and gotten better policy from the federal to the local level. The question now is: how do we turn these initial reforms into lasting, food system transformation?

How do we know the food movement is a force for transformative change, rather than a passing fad, a collection of weak reforms, or isolated local efforts? To know this, we need a moment of reflection on how the food system is structured historically, politically and economically. We need to build alliances to take on the root of our failing food system.

Corporate Food Regimes

One way to imagine the food system is as a “regime.” A food regime is a “rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale.” The first global food regime spanned the late 1800s through the Great Depression and linked food imports from Southern and American colonies to European industrial expansion. The second food regime reversed the flow of food from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere to fuel Cold War industrialization in the Third World.

Today’s corporate food regime is characterized by the monopoly market power and mega-profits of agrifood corporations, globalized meat production, and growing links between food and fuel. Virtually

* This Backgrounder is based on Eric Holt-Giménez and Annie Shattuck’s 2011 article ‘Food crises, food regimes and food movements: rumblings of reform or tides of transformation?’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38: 1, 109 — 144. References are at the end of that article which can be accessed at <http://www.foodfirst.org/en/node/3253>

all the world's food systems are tied into today's corporate food regime. This regime is controlled by a far-flung agrifood industrial complex, made up of huge monopolies like Monsanto, ADM, Cargill and Walmart. Together, these corporations are powerful enough to dominate the governments and the multilateral organizations that make and enforce the regime's rules for trade, labor, property and technology. This political-economic partnership is supported by both public and private institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the World Food Program, USAID, the USDA and big philanthropy.

Liberalization and Reform

Like the larger economic system of which they are a part, global food regimes alternate between periods of liberalization characterized by unregulated markets, corporate privatization and massive concentrations of wealth, followed by devastating financial busts. When these busts provoke widespread social unrest—threatening profits and governability—governments usher in reformist periods in which markets, supply, and consumption are re-regulated to reign in the crisis and restore stability to the regime. Infinitely unregulated markets would eventually destroy both society and the natural resources that the regime depends on for profits. Therefore, while the 'mission' of reform is to mitigate the social and environmental externalities of the corporate food regime, its 'job' is identical to that of the liberal trend: the reproduction of the corporate food regime. Though liberalization and reform may appear politically distinct, they are actually two sides of the same system.

Reformists dominated the global food regime from the Great Depression of the 1930s until Ronald Reagan and Margaret

Thatcher ushered in our current era of neoliberal "globalization," in the 1980s, characterized by deregulation, privatization, and the growth and consolidation of corporate monopoly power in food systems around the globe.

With the global food and financial crises of 2007-2010, desperate calls for reform have sprung up worldwide. However, few substantive reforms have been forthcoming, and most government and multilateral solutions simply call for more of the same policies that brought about the crisis to begin with: extending liberal ("free") markets, privatizing common resources (like forests and the atmosphere), and protecting monopoly concentration while mediating the regime's collateral damage to community food systems and the environment. Unless there is strong pressure from society, reformists will not likely affect (much less reverse) the present neoliberal direction of the corporate food regime.

Food Enterprise, Food Security, Food Justice, Food Sovereignty

Combating the steady increase in global hunger and environmental degradation has prompted government, industry and civil society to pursue a wide array of initiatives, including food enterprise, food security, food justice and food sovereignty. Some seek to ameliorate hunger and poverty through charity. Others see it as a business opportunity and call for public-private partnerships. Human rights activists insist that government and industry should be held accountable when they undermine the right to food. Those who can afford good food promote individual consumer choices (vote with your forks). Food justice activists from underserved communities struggle against structural racism in

the food system. Some efforts are highly institutionalized, others are community-based, while still others build broad-based movements aimed at transforming our global food system.

Understanding which strategies work to stabilize the corporate food regime and which seek to actually change it is essential if we are to move toward more equitable and sustainable food systems.

Some actors within the growing global food movement have a radical critique of the corporate food regime, calling for food sovereignty and structural, redistributive reforms including land, water and markets. Others advance a progressive, food justice agenda calling for access to healthy food by marginalized groups defined by race, gender and economic status. Family farm, sustainable agriculture advocates, and those seeking quality and authenticity in the food system also fall in this progressive camp. While progressives focus more on localizing production and improving access to good, healthy food, radicals direct their energy at changing regime structures and creating politically enabling conditions for more equitable and sustainable food systems. Both overlap significantly in their approaches. Together, folks in this global food movement seek to open up food systems to serve people of color, smallholders, and low income communities while striving for sustainable and healthy environments. Radicals and progressives are the arms and legs of the same food movement.

The Food Regime—Food Movement Matrix helps describe the dominant trend in the food system according to the politics, production models, tendencies, issues and approaches to the food crisis:

	Corporate Food Regime		Food Movements	
Politics	Neoliberal	Reformist	Progressive	Radical
Discourse	<i>Food Enterprise</i>	<i>Food Security</i>	<i>Food Justice</i>	<i>Food Sovereignty</i>
Main Institutions	International Finance Corporation (World Bank); IMF, WTO: USDA (Vilsak); Global Food Security Bill; Green Revolution; Millennium Challenge; Heritage Foundation; Chicago Global Council; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Feed the Future (USAID)	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank); FAO; UN Commission on Sustainable Development; USDA (Merrigan); mainstream fair trade; some Slow Food Chapters; some Food Policy Councils; most food banks & food aid programs	Alternative fair trade and many Slow Food chapters; many organizations in the Community Food Security Movement; CSAs; many Food Policy Councils and youth food and justice movements; many farmworker and labor organizations	Via Campesina, International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty; Global March for Women; many food justice and rights-based movements
Orientation	<i>Corporate</i>	<i>Development</i>	<i>Empowerment</i>	<i>Entitlement</i>
Model	Overproduction; corporate concentration; unregulated markets and monopolies; monocultures (including organic); GMOs; agrofuels; mass global consumption of industrial food; phasing out of peasant and family agriculture and local retail	Mainstreaming/certification of niche markets (e.g. organic, fair, local, sustainable); maintaining northern agricultural subsidies; “sustainable” roundtables for agrofuels, soy, forest products, etc.; market-led land reform	Agroecologically produced local food; investment in underserved communities; new business models and community benefit packages for production, processing, and retail; better wages for agriculture workers; solidarity economies; land & food access	Dismantle corporate agrifoods monopoly power; parity; redistributive land reform; community rights to water and seed; regionally based food systems; democratization of food systems; sustainable livelihoods; protection from dumping/overproduction; revival of agroecologically managed peasant agriculture to distribute wealth and cool the planet; regulated markets and supply
Approach to the food crisis	Increased industrial production; unregulated corporate monopolies; land grabs; expansion of GMOs; public-private partnerships; liberal markets; international sourced food aid	Same as neoliberal but with increased medium farmer production and some locally sourced food aid; more agricultural aid but tied to GMOs and “bio-fortified/climate-resistant” crops	Right to food; better safety nets; sustainably produced, locally-sourced food; agroecologically based agricultural development	Human right to food sovereignty; locally sourced, sustainably produced, culturally appropriate, democratically controlled focus on UN/FAO negotiations
Guiding Document	World Bank 2009 Development Report; “Realizing a New Vision for Agriculture (World Economic Forum)”	World Bank 2009 Development Report; “Realizing a New Vision for Agriculture (World Economic Forum)”	International Assessment on Agriculture Science Technology and Development	Peoples’ Comprehensive Framework for Action to Eradicate Hunger

Time for transformation

The current food crisis reflects the environmental vulnerability, social inequity, and economic volatility of the corporate food regime. Absent profound changes we will continue to experience cycles of free market liberalization and mild regime reform, plunging the world's food systems into ever graver crises. While food system reforms—such as localizing food assistance, increasing aid to agriculture in the Global South, increasing food stamps and funding research in organic agriculture—are certainly needed and long overdue, they don't alter the balance of power within the food system, and in some cases, may even reinforce existing inequities.

Progressive projects are tremendously energetic, creative and diverse, but can also be locally focused and issue—rather than system—driven. For example, the movement to improve access to food in low-income urban communities has received high level support from the White House and the USDA. But the causes of nutritional deficiency among underserved communities go beyond the location of grocery stores. The abysmal wages, unemployment, skewed patterns of ownership and inner-city blight, and the economic devastation that has been historically visited on these communities are the result of structural racism and class struggles lost. No amount of fresh produce will fix urban America's food and health gap unless it is accompanied by changes in the structures of ownership and a reversal of the diminished political and economic power of low-income people of color. To end hunger at home and abroad practices, rules and institutions (structures) determining the world's food systems must be transformed.



Photo by the Growing Youth Project, Alameda Point Collaborative

Food movements unite!

The challenge for food movements is to address the immediate problems of hunger, malnutrition, food insecurity and environmental degradation, while working steadily towards the structural changes needed to turn sustainable, equitable and democratic food systems into the norm rather than a collection of projects. This means that both reform and transformation are needed. Historically, substantive reforms have been introduced to our political and economic systems, not by the good intentions of reformists per se, but through massive social pressure on legislators—who then introduce reforms. The social pressure for system change comes from social movements.

The food crisis of 2007-2010 has opened up new opportunities for reform and transformation, but has also led to a retrenchment of liberalization. This suggests that substantive changes to the corporate food regime will originate outside the regime's institutions—from the food movement. Whether or not the food movement can bring about change depends on whether or not progressive and radical trends unite.

The inequities and injustices of the corporate food regime are the default condition between food movement organizations. These social, economic and political divides of race and class can't be ignored or willed away. An honest and committed effort to the original food justice principles of anti-racism and equity within the food movement is just as important as working for justice in the food system. Rural-urban and North-South divides must also be addressed in practice and in policy for the food movement to unite in a significant way.

In this regard, the progressive trend is pivotal: If progressive organizations build their primary alliances with reformist institutions from the corporate food regime, the regime will be strengthened, and the food movement will be weakened. In this scenario, we are unlikely to see substantive changes to the status quo. However, if progressive and radical trends find ways to build strategic alliances, the food movement will be strengthened. Social pressure from a united food movement has a much higher likelihood of bringing about reforms and of moving our food systems towards transformation.

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