

# Food First NEWS & VIEWS

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Photo by Leonor Hurtado

## Perpetuating the Eternal Food Fight

By Eric Holt-Giménez

In his January 10, 2011 New York Times Blog, *Beyond the Eternal Food Fight*, Andrew Revkin quizzes Lester Brown and Vaclav Smil, two people he considers to be food and disaster experts, asking “are the current food price spikes the edge of the cliff or just another bump in a long, climbing road?”

Predictably, Lester Brown advances his environmental catastrophe argument, while Smil argues for better governance coupled with preventing the Chinese from adopting grain-fed meat diets. Revkin pleads for a “least-regrets course forward.” All three seem to agree that developed countries shouldn’t live so high on the hog (literally). Brown recognizes that the current food and economic system is destroying the environment we depend upon to survive (something Smil does not), while Smil argues that we have more than enough food to go around—it just doesn’t get around.

Unfortunately they all uncritically support the well-worn “solutions” of genetic engineering and individual consumer choices, thus propping up the global corporate food regime’s assumptions that all problems have a technological solution, and that liberal (“free”) markets are inviolate. The recycling of these failed neoliberal solutions keeps us from addressing the root causes of hunger including poverty, unregulated markets, monopoly concentration and the inequitable distribution of food-producing resources.

Crop scientists now know that genetically engineered crops (GMOs) are not intrinsically higher yielding. For a time pest losses were reduced by inserting the gene from *Baccillus thurengensis* (*Bt*), or losses to weeds by inserting a gene that makes plants resistant to herbicides like Roundup. However, as farmers in the U.S. and elsewhere are already painfully aware, insects develop resistance to *Bt* and weeds build resistances to herbicides resulting in “superweeds.”

Climatologists agree that we are facing extreme and unreliable weather: drought *and* cold, heat *and* flood, pest

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The Institute for Food and Development Policy - known as Food First - is a member-supported, nonprofit "peoples' " think tank and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and value-based solutions to hunger and poverty around the world, with a commitment to establishing food as a fundamental human right.

outbreaks, etc. It is simply impossible for scientists to find a gene for every cultivar to resist every climate event. Yet the seed industry insists they can raise yields and resist climate change; they need to expand markets for seeds, fertilizers and pesticides in Africa, Asia and Latin America to continue their profitable growth.

Framing the market solution as individual "consumer choice" avoids examining the excessive concentration of market power, and extensive external social and environmental costs inherent to a food system controlled by giant agri-food monopolies. Of course we all need to eat lower on the food chain and we should choose to consume products that do not harm the environment. However, this doesn't address the urgent need for land and market reforms, effective antitrust regulation, or halting worldwide rural and urban land grabs by corporations. Consumer choice is meaningless for those who can only afford to consume the cheap, mass-produced, processed food that destroys the environment while making people sick.

The majority of hungry people in the world are small farmers—many are women—scratching out their subsistence on tiny parcels of land using ever more heroic acts of self-exploitation. Many of them actually achieve higher productivity than large agribusiness farms. However, they sell their harvest cheap because they must compete with subsidized grains from the U.S. and Europe that are dumped on their national markets. Months later, they are forced to buy food at higher prices. When they can't afford to buy enough food, they go hungry. What they need is access to land and protection from dumping and gouging—not more genetic engineering or liberalized markets.

There are many, well-documented agroecological methods of farming in use around the world that lower production costs, provide sustainable yields and build resilience to the weather extremes associated with climate change. The difference with this approach to genetic engineering is that instead of manipulating the seed genetics one cultivar at a time, agroecology manages whole agro-ecosystem functions to improve overall farm productivity. Unfortunately for agribusiness, these proven farming techniques make little profit. Thus, Monsanto, Syngenta, and even USAID avoid promoting these proven low-cost techniques.

Agroecology has spread from farmer to farmer with the help of NGOs, farmers' organizations and agroecological scientists. The systemic denial of the efficiency of these methods is evident in the visceral rejection by the US government and the genetic engineering industry to the findings of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). The IAASTD—a four year study carried out by over 400 scientists—found GMOs to be, at best, irrelevant to the task of ending hunger. These scientists, from a wide variety of disciplines, (not just agronomy and molecular biology) took a problem-oriented, systemic approach to conclude that the existing agroecological and farmer-led solutions held the most promise for ending hunger.

Unfortunately, by constructing a false dichotomy between Lester Brown's environmental determinism and Vaclav Smil's technological fundamentalism, Revkin directs us away from the root causes of hunger—the corporate food regime itself—thus perpetuating the eternal food fight.



**Oakland Food Policy Council presents**  
***Transforming the Oakland Food System: A Plan for Action to City Council***

*By Alethea Harper*

The 21 members of the Oakland Food Policy Council (OFPC)—representing all sectors of the Oakland food system and Oakland’s many diverse neighborhoods—have been meeting since September 2009. This all-volunteer council crafted their first official recommendations with the release of a report: ***Transforming the Oakland Food System: A Plan for Action.***

After discussing many approaches to transforming the Oakland food system, the OFPC members settled on ten *Recommended First Steps* aimed at setting Oakland on the path to a healthier food system. In spite of financial constraints, this is a good time to tackle transforming food systems. Food issues are currently at the forefront of public consciousness. A strong, supportive policy framework will make it possible for the good work being done by many actors within the Oakland food system to thrive and grow.

Three of the ten recommended first steps are:

1. ***PROTECT AND EXPAND URBAN AGRICULTURE:***  
 Create zoning definitions and operating standards for both civic and commercial urban agriculture.
2. ***PROMOTE USE OF FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AT FARMERS’ MARKETS:***  
 Promote use and acceptance of food assistance program benefits at farmers’ markets.
3. ***DEVELOP A “FRESH FOOD FINANCING INITIATIVE.”*** Develop a “Fresh Food Financing Initiative” (FFFI) that will provide financing, technical assistance, and location assistance to new food enterprises in underserved communities.

The OFPC brought a summary of the *Plan for Action* to the Oakland City Council Life Enrichment Committee on January 11, 2011. The report was accepted and filed. Next steps include promoting and advocating for each of the First Steps outlined in the plan. The Oakland Food Policy Council will provide an ongoing “report card” on the health of Oakland’s food system.

You can read more about the Oakland Food Policy Council’s activities on the OFPC blog at <http://www.oaklandfood.org/blog>, Facebook page, and mailing list at <http://groups.google.com/group/ofpc-announcements>.

Review the Policy and Agency Scan at [www.oaklandfood.org/home/policy\\_scan](http://www.oaklandfood.org/home/policy_scan)

Download a copy of the *Plan for Action* at [http://www.oaklandfood.org/home/policy\\_recommendations](http://www.oaklandfood.org/home/policy_recommendations)

**Explore your Global Food System with Food First’s new travel program: *Food Sovereignty Tours* visit burgeoning food sovereignty networks**

*By Tanya Kerssen*

In 2010, Food First launched a new educational travel program, **Food Sovereignty Tours**, to bring you to the front lines of the world’s most dynamic movements for food sovereignty. With two tours to Cuba and Bolivia offered in 2010, we’re excited about the potential of this program to create powerful alliances among farmers, activists and engaged consumers from around the world. In 2011, Food Sovereignty Tours will meet with some of the most inspiring movements working to build a sustainable food future while resisting top-down and divisive trade and development. In May 2011 we will lead a second tour to Cuba to learn about the ongoing work of social transformation that supports their sustainable farming innovation of recent decades, and a tour to learn how the Basque farmers’ Union, EHNE, has succeeded in preserving the strong culture of cooperation and self-sufficiency in the Basque region. Bolivia has emerged as a moral voice in the world, calling for a new development model based not on accumulation, but on the indigenous value of “living well” or *Suma Qamaña*.

As I prepare for our February trip to Mali and Senegal, I realize what a truly unique opportunity this is to meet the farmers, scholars and activists on the frontlines of the global movement for food sovereignty. For several years, Food First has been meeting with NGOs and producer associations in

Africa, supporting the groundswell of grassroots organizing for sustainable agriculture and locally-controlled food systems. The momentum is staggering. In 2007, Food First co-sponsored a meeting in Selingué, Mali to promote an informed and inclusive discussion of the latest mega-development plan being imposed on the continent: the “New Green Revolution for Africa.” The Sélingué conference laid the groundwork for a pan-African campaign for traditional,

sustainable and democratic solutions to the food crisis. In February 2011, at the World Social Forum in Dakar, our delegation will have the privilege of attending the formal launch of the “We are the Solution!” campaign for African food sovereignty.

Food Sovereignty Tours draws upon Food First’s 35-year network of farmer organizations and food activists and upon our proud reputation as the U.S.’s foremost think tank dedicated

to ending the injustices that cause hunger. Fall 2011 tours will include four new fascinating destinations: France, South Korea, Oaxaca and Argentina. You can get a “sneak peak” of upcoming tours by signing up for our newsletter, *Movements* at [www.foodsovereigntytraveltours.org](http://www.foodsovereigntytraveltours.org) and by following us on Facebook ([foodsovereigntytraveltours](http://www.facebook.com/foodsovereigntytraveltours)). Watch our website or become a Facebook friend for notice of upcoming monthly Bay Area dining events to support tour scholarships.

**EXPLORE YOUR GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM WITH**

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**For more information and updates  
about future travel opportunities,  
check out our website:  
[www.foodsovereigntytraveltours.org](http://www.foodsovereigntytraveltours.org)**



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