

Food First BACKGROUNDER

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Grade school class after a lesson from the Food First social studies curriculum, 1988

Food First: Exploding Myths and Inspiring Change for 40 Years

For four decades, Food First has been generating progressive analyses of development issues at home and abroad, and amplifying the voices of local and global movements for peace, social justice, human rights, and the right to food. When we look back, we are amazed at the breadth of topics Food First has taken on over the years, speaking to the timeliest challenges facing humanity while always highlighting the struggles of ordinary people.

We are humbled by this remarkable history because it reminds us that we stand on the shoulders of visionary analysts and activists like Frances (“Frankie”) Moore Lappé, Joseph Collins, Walden Bello, Peter Rosset, Medea Benjamin, Anuradha Mittal, Christine Ahn, Raj Patel, and countless others—who pushed the envelope and gave us new ways of seeing the world. As part of Food First and beyond, they exploded the myths that, as Raj says, “do a lot of thinking for us.” Food First’s goal, then as now, is to give people the tools to take back the power—to think for themselves; to understand how our food (and economic) system works; and to engage in deeply informed activism.

Published in 1977, *Food First: Beyond the myth of scarcity* is Food First’s hallmark (and namesake) publication. Frankie and Joe’s pioneering book argued that the root causes of hunger were not to be found in underproductive agriculture, the whims of nature, or insufficient food aid, but rather in an unjust distribution of wealth, resources, and political power. The implications of this analysis are far-reaching: only through a radical reorganization of society will we achieve genuine solutions to poverty and hunger.

The 1970s and 80s saw a number of struggles around the world fighting for precisely this kind of radical change including revolutionary movements in Central America. Through its solidarity activism and publications, Food

First provided a window onto these movements and the US-supported campaigns to crush them. Foreign aid, Food First pointed out, often worsened hunger and dependency, fanning the flames of conflict rather than promoting peace and development. And in the 1980s and 90s, when the aid agenda turned into a “free trade” agenda with the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Food First continued to inform the public about the devastating consequences for countries of the Global South as well as for workers and farmers in the United States.

In numerous publications, Food First outlined the disaster of neoliberal

globalization, including *Chile’s Free Market Miracle* by Joe Collins, *A Siamese Tragedy* by Walden Bello, and *Shafted: Free trade and America’s working poor* by Christine Ahn. From the wreckage of neoliberal globalization, which pushed people—especially communities of color, women, peasants, and indigenous people—to the edge of survival, new movements emerged such as the Zapatistas in southern Mexico; the international peasant movement La Vía Campesina with its cry for “food sovereignty”; Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement (MST); and the US community food security movement.

Food First participated in many of these movements—organizing, protesting, debating, giving congressional testimony,

teaching courses, leading delegations, and facilitating workshops. In recent years, we have witnessed and celebrated the unprecedented advance of people power around the world. In the US, Occupy Wall Street, the climate justice movement, food and farm worker organizing, and anti-racism protests have contributed to a richer definition of “food justice” and broader alliances for transformation. Informed by global peasant movements, the UN now touts agroecology and peasants’ rights as the way forward.

As we look around us in 2015, we are energized, inspired, and eager to face the future arm-in-arm with the vast family of supporters, allies, and friends who have shaped 40 years of Food First.

FOOD FIRST TIMELINE: BOOKS, ACHIEVEMENTS & WORLD EVENTS

1971

Food First co-founder Frances (“Frankie”) Moore Lappé publishes *Diet for a Small Planet*, which has now sold over three million copies.

1975

Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappé meet at the first World Food Conference in Rome and found the Institute for Food and Development Policy, aka Food First.

1977

Food First publishes *Food First: Beyond the myth of scarcity* by Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins and *Needless Hunger: Voices from a Bangladeshi village* by James Boyce and Betsy Hartmann.

1979

The Sandinistas overthrow the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and establish a revolutionary government, which lasts until 1990 in spite of a US-funded and trained militia known as the Contras.

1981

Food First publishes the book *Circle of Poison* by David Weir and Mark Schapiro, which leads to the formation of Pesticide Action Network, an international coalition concerned with pesticide poisoning.

1982

Food First publishes *Nicaragua: What difference could a revolution make?* by Joseph Collins with Frances Moore Lappé and Nick Allen.

1984

Food First publishes an integrated social studies curriculum designed to help sixth grade students understand their food’s journey from the farm to the dinner table, and the causes of hunger at home and abroad. Food First founds the Television Organizing Project, which splits off in 1986 as Neighbor-to-Neighbor, to put political pressure on Congress to stop US military aid to right-wing forces in Central America.

1986

Food First co-founders publish *World Hunger: 12 Myths*, which examines the policies that have kept hungry people from feeding themselves around the world. *World Hunger* is now in its third and revised edition (forthcoming 2015). Food First publishes *Alternatives to the Peace Corps*. Now in its 12th edition, it was the first guide to offer options for volunteer service focused on social change.

1987

Frances Moore Lappé accepts the Right Livelihood Award (Alternative Nobel Prize) on behalf of Food First “for revealing the political and economic causes of world hunger and how citizens can help to remedy them.”

Food First publishes *Don’t Be Afraid Gringo* by Elvia Alvarado, translated and edited by Medea Benjamin which tells the story of peasant struggles and US intervention in Honduras. The book wins the Bay Area Book Publishers best biography of the year award.



Medea Benjamin accepts the Bay Area Book Award for *Don’t Be Afraid Gringo*, 1987. Photo by Elliott Smith

1988

Food First publishes *A Fate Worse than Debt* by Susan George, which analyzes the World Bank and IMF’s structural adjustment programs in the Third World. Food First staffers Kevin Danaher and Medea Benjamin start the human rights organization Global Exchange.

1989

The Soviet Union falls. Cuba loses access to petroleum inputs, leading to its widespread adoption of sustainable agriculture. Food First publishes *Kerala: Radical reform as development in an Indian state* by Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin.

1990

Frances Moore Lappé founds the Center for Living Democracy. Among its publications is the 1997 report *Bridging the Racial Divide* describing how citizens



Walden Bello, TV interview with Edward Klammer, 1990

across the country are sponsoring interracial dialogues.

1992

Food First publishes *Dragons in Distress* by Food First Executive Director Walden Bello and Stephanie Rosenfeld, which challenges prevailing wisdom on Asia's "miracle economies." Global Exchange and Food First co-organize the first US delegation to Cuba focused on sustainable agriculture.

1993

The international peasant movement La Vía Campesina is founded in Mons, Belgium, which now includes over 150 member organizations in 70 countries representing 300 million farmers.

1994

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) goes into effect. On the morning of January 1, the Zapatista movement is born in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, inspiring anti-globalization activists around the world. The Community Food Security Coalition—which reaches a membership of 500 organizations—is founded to provide leadership to the rapidly expanding food movement in North America.

1995

The World Trade Organization (WTO) comes into existence with the goal of extending free trade and investment across the globe. Former Food First Executive Director Walden Bello founds the Bangkok-based think tank Focus on the Global South aimed at counteracting neoliberalism and militarization.

Food First publishes *Breakfast of Biodiversity* by John Vandermeer and Yvette Perfecto, which describes the global economic forces responsible for rainforest destruction, and *Chile's Free-Market Miracle: A second look* by Joseph

Collins and John Lear, which examines the gap between free market rhetoric and socioeconomic realities in Pinochet's Chile.

1996

La Vía Campesina launches the concept of "food sovereignty" at the World Food Summit: "the right of all peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."

1997

Food First publishes *Benedita da Silva: An Afro-Brazilian woman's story of politics and love*, which tells the story of the first Black woman from a favela to become a congresswoman and senator in Brazil. Starting in Thailand, a devastating financial crisis strikes East Asia.

1999

Executive Director Peter Rosset and board vice-president Miguel Altieri are invited to the Vatican to provide a consultation on hunger in the 21st century. Food First publishes three books: *America Needs Human Rights*, which argues that human rights are routinely violated in the US; *A Siamese Tragedy: Development and degradation in modern Thailand*, which looks at the role of foreign investment in causing that country's economic collapse; and *Basta! Land and the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas*, now in its third and revised edition.

In November, Food First participates in massive protests at the WTO Ministerial in Seattle, WA, which catalyzes the US anti-globalization movement. The Congressional Progressive Caucus launches its "Economic Human Rights" bus tour of economic injustices in the US, co-sponsored by Food First and the Institute for Policy Studies. The tour kicks off in Georgia joined by Danny Glover and Harry Belafonte.

2001

Food First publishes *The Future in the Balance: Essays on globalization and resistance* by Walden Bello.

2002

Food First publishes *Sustainable Agriculture and Resistance: Transforming food production in Cuba* by Fernando Funes, Peter Rosset, Luis García, Nilda Pérez, and Martin Bourque, which tells the story of Cuba's remarkable recovery from a food crisis brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union and turn toward organic farming. Food First founder Frances Moore Lappé and her daughter Anna Lappé establish the Small Planet

Institute and Small Planet Fund, channeling resources to social movements worldwide. Former Food First staffer Medea Benjamin founds Code Pink: Women for Peace, a grassroots organization working to end US-funded wars and occupations.

2003

Activists shut down the WTO in Cancún. Food First works with indigenous and peasant activist groups protesting the inclusion of agriculture within WTO trade rules and, as a UN NGO on the inside, influences India to withdraw. Talks collapse.

2004

Food First publishes *Genetic Engineering in Agriculture: The myths, environmental risks, and alternatives* by Miguel Altieri.

2006

Food First publishes *Campesino a Campesino: Voices from Latin America's farmer to farmer movement for sustainable agriculture* by Eric Holt-Giménez and *Promised Land: Competing visions of agrarian reform* edited by Peter Rosset, Raj Patel, and Michael Courville, produced in partnership with organizations in Thailand, Brazil, and South Africa. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation come together to form the Alliance for a New Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).

2007

Food First participates in the Forum for Food Sovereignty in Nyéléni, Mali, which includes more than 500 people representing organizations from over 80 countries. Food First warns delegates of the colonial intent behind the new Green Revolution for Africa. At Nyéléni, Food First co-organizes an international conference with 150 participants from 35 African and northern countries to discuss African Alternatives to the Green Revolution. Planning for the African-led "We Are the Solution" campaign begins. The Nyéléni Declaration asserts that: Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes, and generations."

In 2007 and 2008, world food prices increase dramatically, creating a global crisis and causing political and economic instability in both poor and developed nations. The number of hungry people in the world tops one billion.

2008

Food First agrees to incubate the newly-

created Oakland Food Policy Council, now a thriving a 21-seat council that makes recommendations to the City of Oakland on ways to make the system more equitable and sustainable.

2009

Food First publishes three books: *Agrofuels in the Americas*, edited by Rick Jonasse; *Beyond the Fence: A journey to the roots of the migration crisis* by Dori Stone; and *Food Rebellions: Crisis and the hunger for justice* by Eric Holt-Giménez, Raj Patel, and Annie Shattuck, which analyzes the events that led to the global food crisis of 2007-2008 and documents the grassroots initiatives working to create food sovereignty. Food First also publishes the report "Food Policy Councils: Lessons Learned," an in-depth study of 48 North American Food Policy Councils. On June 28, 2009, democratically elected Honduran president Manuel Zelaya is overthrown in a military coup.

2010

Food First launches its formal educational travel program Food Sovereignty Tours geared toward helping farmers, scholars, activists, and consumers connect with the global movement for food sovereignty. Food First co-publishes the book *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting food, nature and community*, edited by Annette Desmarais, Nettie Wiebe, and Hannah Wittman, which has since become a definitive text on food sovereignty. Food First is a founding member of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, launched on World Food Day (Oct. 16), which evolved out of the US Working Group on the Food Crisis convened in 2008 with the goal of promoting the principles of food sovereignty in the US.



Launch of the We Are the Solution campaign for African family farming at the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal, 2011. Photo by Tanya Kerssen

2011

The campaign "We Are the Solution: Celebrating African family farming" is launched at the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal, led by rural women from six West African countries. Food First supports the campaign with resources, analysis, and agroecological training materials. Food First publishes the book *Food Movements Unite! Strategies to transform our food systems* edited by Eric Holt-Giménez, which highlights the voices of farmers, workers, and activists from rural and urban communities around the globe.

On November 2, Occupy Oakland calls for a General Strike. Food First co-organizes a Food Justice Teach In & Eat In with other Bay Area organizations in a joint call to "Occupy the Food System." Food First co-hosts the 13th Annual Community Food Security Coalition conference in Oakland, CA, with a record 1,100 attendees. Food Sovereignty Tours organizes ten Food Justice Tours allowing 305 conference participants to visit Bay Area food justice organizations.

2012

Food First convenes a group of researchers and activists in Oakland, CA, to discuss land grabbing and resistance in the Americas—North and South, urban and rural—in an initiative that becomes the Land & Sovereignty in the Americas Collective. Food First publishes *Unfinished Puzzle: Cuban agriculture, the challenges, lessons and opportunities* by Eduardo Francisco Freyre Roach and May Ling Chan.

2013

Food First publishes *Grabbing Power: The new struggles for land, food and democracy in northern Honduras* by Tanya Kerssen about the history of agribusiness and peasant struggles in Honduras, and the repression of rural movements following the 2009 coup. Food First co-organizes the first major academic conference focused on food sovereignty at Yale University: "Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue." La Vía Campesina celebrates its 20th anniversary and moves its secretariat from Indonesia to Zimbabwe.

Food First launches the East Bay Urban Farmer Field Schools (EBUFFS) project using farmer-to-farmer education to build sustainable urban agriculture. Food Sovereignty Tours hosts 13 farmers from the Basque Farmers' Union for a Food Justice Tour of the Bay Area and takes



Executive Director Eric Holt-Giménez leads a workshop of the EBUFFS project in San Leandro, CA, 2013. Photo by Leonor Hurtado

its first delegation to South Korea co-organized by the Korean Women's Peasant Association.

2014

Food First publishes a landmark action-research study on the "Food Insecurity of Restaurant Workers" in partnership with Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) and Food Chains Workers Alliance. Food First also publishes three important briefs in its Land & Sovereignty series on the financialization of farmland; land grabbing and peasant resistance in Paraguay; and land grabbing in the United States.

The police killing of Black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, and public outcry put racial injustice in the spotlight. Food First identifies "dismantling racism in the food system" as an institutional priority. The Obama administration lifts restrictions on travel and trade with Cuba.

2015

Food First celebrates its 40th anniversary with a national speaking tour featuring Eric Holt-Giménez; special events in the Bay Area including a Food Day gala; a VIP Food Sovereignty Tour to Cuba; and a 40th anniversary book featuring selected Food First writings. Join us in celebrating four decades of Food First!

Bring Our 40th Anniversary Book to Life!

Help us fund the production of our 40th anniversary anthology, which will bring together selected writings from four decades of Food First analysis and movement building. Donors of \$100 or more will be mentioned in the acknowledgements and receive a complimentary copy! Write "40th Anniversary Book" in the memo line of your check or call 510-654-4400, ext. 221. You can also contribute online at: www.foodfirst.org/40th-book/