



DR ERIC HOLT-GIMÉNEZ

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FOOD FIRST

CULTIVATING BEST PRACTICES

Dr Eric Holt-Giménez provides an eye-opening insight into the problematic relationship between race, nutrition and agriculture in the US, and outlines the movement-based activities undertaken by the organisation to address national food injustice



2016 will mark your 10th year as Executive Director of Food First. In what ways have you witnessed the organisation evolve during this time?

Food First has reorientated its focus over the last decade to incorporate the struggles for food justice in the US into our frameworks and analyses. The organisation used to be very much internationally focused and looked at the injustices that caused hunger around the world. Now, we are turning our attention to the US. What becomes immediately apparent when you study hunger, food insecurity and diet-related diseases nationwide is that they are all racially determined. People of colour and immigrants have the highest levels of nutrition-based ailments and food insecurity. They also happen to be the ones who work in the food system as food or farm workers, at processing plants and at the back of fancy restaurants. This has led us to address structural racism in the food system and to build alliances with movements for immigration and labour rights.

Throughout its 40-year history, why has Food First continued to support local movements and activists?

We haven't always done so. Food First used to be much more policy orientated, and our official name is still Institute for Food and Development Policy. Very early on we understood that hunger was not caused by scarcity but by poverty, and so our work was dedicated to influencing anti-poverty policies. We then realised that poverty was largely caused by injustice. As we began to address the injustices that cause hunger, we had to learn much more from the social movements that were fighting them. It really was a natural progression for Food First to go from a policy-orientated think tank to a movement-based one. Once we began to establish alliances with social movements around the world dedicated to ending the injustices that cause hunger, it began to change the way we frame our research as well as generate and use information. Now, we are trying to amplify the voices of those social

movements and, at the same time, provide them with useful information and analyses.

Could you discuss the areas in which Food First has worked over the past 12 months?

We work in many diverse locations, with projects on the ground in the US, Mexico and Africa. We also take food sovereignty tours to six countries around the world. What has become more prominent in our research and across our activities are the issues related to farmland, such as land grabbing, justice, sovereignty, reforms etc. These factors displace people and drive the migration and destruction of local food systems globally.

As discussed, racism has been a big issue since the founding of the US. The food system was built and continues to depend on the exploitation of people of colour. This isn't only a national problem, it is increasingly occurring worldwide; racism can also be clearly seen in Europe, especially with regard to immigration. Land and racism have therefore occupied most of our time over the last year.

You recently spoke about the controversial Trans-Pacific Partnership. How can international deals, such as this one, disadvantage poorer countries?

These partnerships don't only disadvantage poorer countries, they disadvantage working people in rich countries as well. They are essentially deals that give global rights to corporations that trump national constitutions, laws, regulations and citizens' rights. One of the most egregious examples is the expansion of the extractive industries sector – especially mining. In El Salvador, for instance, because mining uses and contaminates so much water, the availability of potable water is becoming scarce – to the extent that the country wants to stop mining and has submitted a moratorium on any further contracts. As a result, El Salvador is being taken to arbitration court at the World Trade



CAMPESINO A CAMPESINO

Having spent time in Central America, Dr Eric Holt-Giménez describes the influential 'Campesino a Campesino' (Farmer to Farmer) method and how it increases production and yields

Campesino a Campesino is a movement of farmers who, about 30 years ago, were exploited by the Green Revolution. They fell prey to credit, hybrid seeds and chemical inputs, which very quickly destroyed their soils, leaving them in debt. This was right before we had mass migrations of people out of the countryside and into the US. They were desperate and began to use agroecological methods to recover soil fertility, as well as soil and water conservation strategies.

The Campesino a Campesino farmers developed an approach in which they carried out small-scale experimentation to overcome the limiting factors of production, after which they shared these results with one another through field visits. This exchange of knowledge is what inspired the 'Farmer to Farmer' name. It was so successful – this marriage of agroecology and farmer-peasant pedagogy – that it became a farmer-led movement that spread throughout Central America and into South America. This approach very much saved farmers from the Green Revolution. It was also one of the factors that saved Cuba during the Special Period in Time of Peace after the fall of the Soviet Union, when they had to rely on agroecology to maintain production. The movement grew very quickly. It took around 20 years for Central America to generate half a million farmers, but only three years for Cuba to do the same. At present, the limiting factors for productivity for most peasants around the world are soil and water, so if these are addressed – and small producers have secure land access and are paid fair prices – there should be tremendous increases in production.



PROJECTS AT FOOD FIRST

Farmer-Led Pollinator Restoration in Central Mexico

Indigenous farmers are working to conserve soil, water and biodiversity as they restore pollinators to hundreds of acres of smallholder farmland.

Land & Sovereignty in the Americas Activist-Researcher Collective

Activists and researchers are brought together to understand and address the issue of land grabbing throughout the Americas.

East Bay Urban Farmer Field Schools

They generate useful agroecological knowledge and build farmer-to-farmer and community relationships for community-driven food security.

We Are the Solution: Farmer to Farmer Education

Women farmers in West Africa have launched this campaign to promote African family farming, with the support of Food First-generated farmer-to-farmer training materials on agroecology and policy engagement.

Food Sovereignty Tours

Food First's educational travel programme connects individuals with the front lines of the global food sovereignty movement to meet with the people and organisations working to transform their food systems.

Organization by Canadian mining industries that want to exert their rights to mine gold there, even at the cost of depleting the country's water supply. This is a very graphic example of how these trade deals privilege multinational corporations over the rights and needs of people in poorer countries.

Why do trade agreements disregard diet and health?

Instead of focusing on diet and health, trade agreements concentrate on expanding markets and destroying any form of social regulation in favour of accumulating international capital. At present, corporations are going through a tremendous crisis in terms of capital growth, which means they can't find suitable markets, so they have to continually expand.

Within the framework of nutritionism, food processing corporations are looking to sell bio-fortified, nutrient-enriched and processed foods. Food trade agreements tend to destroy local food systems and displace the peasantry, after which they want to sell commodified nutrients back to people who used to have well-balanced diets because of the many different things they grew. Now, they are being sold candy bars and fortified cereals instead. These corporations are neither focused on healthcare nor free trade; they are very much commodity-based.

Shortly after your appointment at Food First, food sources were deeply affected by the global recession. What role has the organisation played in helping countries to 'bounce back' from this crisis?

We're a think tank focused on research and analysis, so we don't aid countries directly. We have helped people to understand the causes of the recession and the measures that were put in by our governments, which have been far from effective at the society level. They've helped corporations get back on their feet – particularly banks, which are now bigger than they were before the crash. We explain the causes behind this and how it effects the food system.

On a personal note, which milestone or achievement has been the most rewarding during your term at Food First?

Most non-profits that deal with international issues tend to be in solidarity with international struggles and social movements. What Food First has done since I have been here is to link those international struggles for food sovereignty to national struggles here in the US for food justice.

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