

Eric Holt-Giménez: “Food Movements Unite!”

Holt-Giménez, E. (Ed.) (2012): *Food Movements Unite!*. New York, NY: Food First!

In the face of precarious food prices, monolithic industrial agri-business, and an ever-uncertain climate, it is books like *Food Movements Unite!* that build a web of hope to hold on to. In the words of the book's editor, Eric Holt-Giménez, “another food system is possible.”

How do the roles of consumers, food producers, activists, and policy makers fit together to bring concepts like food sovereignty and agroecology to life? How do food movements tie in to human rights, climate justice, and feminist movements? What are the toughest roadblocks and what will be the drivers of change? Through a diverse collection of voices, this timely book shines a light on these vital questions. Each contribution explores a different aspect of our globalized food systems, tying together the experiences of farmers' networks in West Africa, immigrant restaurant workers in the United States, fair trade activists in Spain, landless rural workers in Brazil and many more.

Each perspective digs deeply into the problems inherent in our current food system. The book tackles the dominating neo-liberal approach to feeding the world, exposing how it crams a whole lot of power and wealth into a very small portion of the world's piggy banks. We see the consequences of the boundless deregulation of markets, privatization of common resources and growth of transnational corporate monopolies. *Food Movements Unite!* makes it blatantly clear that this system does not work.

Representatives of the world's largest peasant movements tell of small-scale farmers who find their local markets flooded with cheap imported goods, or who are trapped in a cycle of dependence on the companies that supply their genetically modified seeds and specialized chemical fertilizers. Founders of workers rights coalitions explain how the status quo also fails to bring decent livelihoods to the employees of big industrial farms or the kitchen workers in popular restaurant chains. Other community and health organizations describe how the system doesn't even work for consumers, who run into health problems from eating all the over-processed chemical-laden foods that line grocery store shelves.

It is time for a major transformation in how the world fills its 7 billion stomachs. “The reality is too urgent, and the outlook far to bleak to settle for anything less”, says Brian Tokar from the Institute for Social Ecology in his chapter on climate justice and food sovereignty.

The power of *Food Movements Unite!* is that it allows us to understand not only the scope and complexity of the problem, but also the breadth and diversity of solutions. The contributors aim to forge a new path, away from the plethora of over-simplified or false solutions that lull us into inaction. The book exposes the hypocrisy of green consumerism, denouncing companies like Coca-cola and Walmart who are pouring millions of dollars each year into disguising business-as-usual with advertisements that have an environmental focus.

The book also explores the limitations of certification labels such as ‘organic’, ‘local’ and ‘fair trade’, and deconstructs the concept of ‘voting with your fork’ as a universal solution. Josh Viertel of Slow Food USA explains how these foods may simply not be as environmentally and

socially friendly as they make out to be. As these product lines enter the mainstream and attract larger corporate participation, standards are slipping into the hands of Northern market-centric certification agencies that mute the voices of smallholders and activists. One label can also hide the lack of another. An organic banana for example, could have been harvested by an underpaid plantation worker. A local tomato might have been grown in an energy intensive greenhouse and sprayed with pesticides. Viertel also makes it clear that while we should all try to eat food that reflects our values, many people do not have this option. We cannot simply advocate the power of consumer choice, when so many people do not physically or financially have access to more sustainable, healthy options.

A common thread throughout the book is that in order to create real change in our food systems, the actions and choices of individuals must be accompanied by a structural overturn that empowers producers, communities and consumers to control their own food systems.

The book takes the reader beyond the “reformist” response to the food crisis – the kind of ‘solutions’ that still follow rules of the corporate food regime – towards what Holt-Giménez calls “the progressive” and “radical” food movements, that embrace principles like food justice and above all, food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty is introduced in the opening pages of the book as defined in the Nyéléni Declaration, the outcome document of the 2007 world food sovereignty conference in:

“Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound, and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”

The book shows how food sovereignty is gaining momentum, from its origins with the radical peasant movement, la Via Campesina, to how it is now beginning to enter United Nations debates through forums like the UN Committee on World Food Security. The concept takes on new dimensions as each organization articulates it in its own terms. Hearing from climate justice activists, and feminist movements like the World March of Women, we learn how reworking our food system ties into gender equality, economic stability and climate change mitigation. And we begin to see how all these pieces need to come together in order to make change happen.

Although the book lacks representation from the fisheries sector, and leans heavily on examples from the U.S., it is still remarkably thorough. It would have been impossible to represent the voices of all those working and depending on food systems. The contributors in the book are only telling a sampling of stories, but they provide hopeful windows into the vast number and diversity of people, organizations, and global movements that are working towards more sustainable and just food systems.

This is the power of *Food Movements Unite!* It will feed the determination of farm-workers campaigning for their rights; it will inform the decisions of NGO’s that want to help communities who can’t bring healthy food to the table, and it will help consumers understand their role and the impact of their choices.

We all have to eat. It is something that links all humans together and ties us to the Earth. *Food Movements Unite!* shows us how this simple fact turns food into a driver of many of the world’s problems, but also gives it the potential to be a driver of many solutions.

To quote the title of one of the chapters, “Now’s the time to make it happen.” Nora Mckee is the coordinator of Terranuova, an exchange and advocacy program for African and European farmers’ organizations. She writes: “There are cracks in the corporate armour, people’s food sovereignty movements have never been stronger, and there’s a new global forum [the United Nations Commission on World Food Security] in which their experiences can be brought to bear.” All the dots are lining up, and pointing towards significant change.

Food Movements Unite! is a call to link conscious shoppers with restaurant workers, activists with educators, farmers and fisherfolk with community gardeners, policy makers with grocery store owners.

Rosalinda Guillén, from the grassroots organization Community to Community, explains that if this movement is going to work, we have to go beyond trying to make small dents in the same old structure. We must “move out of that box”, she says, “and think as human beings of our own personal dignity, and the dignity of our communities, in a deeper, transformative way”. Food Movements Unite! builds the power to break free from that box and find unity in this growing “meshwork” of food movements.

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