

GLOBALIZATION AND DIVERSITY - THE HEALTH RISKS

by Dr. Diane Dodd



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Glut, gluttony, obesity, unparalleled choice, wealth, health, poverty, hunger - these are all part of the planet we share in the 21st century. How did we come to such a rich and at the same time vulgar culinary extremes?

This is one of the pressing challenges facing cultural leaders today. Without a unified approach to dealing with world food problems we are unlikely to make much ground to address the enormous inequality in food resources. But, by raising the issues and developing a common understanding of the need to safeguard diversity in order to be sustainable, we may be able to identify at least the policies that leaders and policy makers should embrace to be successful.

It has been argued by the International Center for tropical Agriculture (CIAT) that the 'worldwide spread of a standard globalized diet is putting more food on the dinner table, but at the expense of diverse local crops'....and that...'global uniformity heightens the risk of food crises due to climate change.' The study, conducted by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) concludes that during the past 50 years, human diets around the world have been converging "by a global average of 36 percent and the trend shows no signs of slowing, with major consequences for human nutrition and global food security."¹

Wheat, maize and soybean are critical for combating world hunger, but as a global diet it provides limited diversity and yet, more and more people are relying on these food staples with real health implications. This means more and more people are eating increased proteins, calories and fat. We are warned by nutritionalists that growing demand on just a

¹ http://cgiarweb.s3.amazonaws.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/03/Global-FoodSupply_press-release_CIAT.pdf (accessed 2 March 2015)

handful of food crop varieties may accelerate and exasperate the rise in obesity, heart disease and diabetes, which are strongly affected by dietary change and have become major health problems in so-called 'richer countries'.

For poorer countries the threat is huge, as more homogeneous food crops make agriculture more vulnerable to drought, insect pests, diseases and manipulation by large corporate food companies. With ever more food choices available in the western world – it is hard to make the claim that we are losing food diversity but it is a reality. In an article called *Placing Food*, Nina Marie Lister asks: *Have we become so dis connected from our food that we have forgotten the truth that underlies the cliché—we are what we eat?*²

As more and more people switch to a globalised diet, many people are witnessing a widening of choice and options in one direction but a reduced knowledge about their own food culture.

The answer will be in education and tourism. We need to support urgent efforts to better inform consumers about diet-related diseases and to promote healthier, more diverse food alternatives. To do this, people need to feel pride in local food stuffs and value their cultural significance. In order to support a process of widening diets we need to ensure that large food corporations do not submerge the market through very visible and glossy food campaigns. We need public support for food diversity and at IGCAT we have started a programme to identify useful and meaningful public interventions where food diversity is fostered.

Our globalised diet is being driven by powerful corporations and with unchecked market mentality both social and economic forces make it almost impossible for consumers to understand the potential harm. Trade liberalization, transport, multinational food industries and even food safety standardization have reinforced negative diversity trends.

CIAT notes that *'rising incomes in developing countries, for example, have enabled more consumers to include larger quantities of animal products, oils and sugars in their diets. Moreover, urbanization in these countries has encouraged greater consumption of processed and fast foods. Countries experiencing rapid dietary change are also quickly seeing rises in the associated diseases of overabundance.'*

Gastronomy is an important part of the economy from food production and distribution to marketing, image and supply of food products. But, as Mark Pachter and Charles Landry observed (2001) "The market economy does not intrinsically invite an exploration of higher purposes and goals."³ Therefore leaders need to question the spread of market thinking and rediscover approaches that could actually change and contribute to making food and cultural diversity a more realistic possibility.

In the words of Robert F. Kennedy *"... gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It*

² PLACING FOOD Nina-Marie Lister http://www.ryerson.ca/foodsecurity/publications/articles/lister_2007.pdf (accessed 3 March 2015)

³ Mark Pachter and Charles Landry (2001) *Culture at the Crossroads: Comedia*

measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."⁴

Are we courageous enough to admit that markets can be wrong? What if I remind you that 1 in 3 people in America is at or near the poverty line?⁵ We are not just talking about the vast inequalities in the world but in the world's richest country that owns 22% of the world's monetary wealth.⁶

Hopeful trends are apparent: in Northern Europe particularly, social innovations abound that are trying to readdress imbalances as more and more consumers want to opt out of the traditional system. From pop-up restaurants to eat with the locals, consumers are tending to grow more interested in variety. Many small and medium size enterprises are springing up to fill gaps in the market, educate consumers, provide fresh tourism experiences, innovate culinary-based activities, highlighting ethical choices and as a result, consumers (albeit often middle class) are apparently buying more cereals and vegetables and less meat, oil and sugar – as they become increasingly aware of health issues.

We need to learn more about minicreative/food enterprises, what is driving their existence, what are potential opportunities and threats – **are they able to drive 'qualitydriven'** employment opportunities for our disenchanted youth for example? Can the tourism sector embrace good practice and focus on quality experiences rather than mass tourism experiences?

Creative tourism offers, food festivals and gastronomy affairs abound in Europe and America. These all drive vast quantities of visitors but these are often undervalued given the high percentage of local visitors versus overnight visitors. This calls into question if it is only about overnight stays? Or, can the value of low-carbon be used to counterbalance positives and negatives? Understanding the drivers and potential of these activities is important. Asking what the value of creativity is in the creative food industries is becoming important. What we already know is that where there is a convergence between arts, culture, creativity and food, we can see the most innovative and interesting ideas emerging.

Nurturing and managing creativity will become all important for local and regional development. We know that audiences/consumers have an increasing appetite for participation, not just passive observation. People want to play as well as pay!

As we look to 2050, you or I may be long gone by then, but somehow the world will need to feed an estimated nine billion people so, the question of which diet is best has taken on new urgency.

Ann Gibbons wrote in the National Geographic that the '**foods we choose to eat in the coming decades will have dramatic ramifications for the planet. Simply put, a diet that revolves around meat and dairy, a way of**

⁴ Robert F. Kennedy Address, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, March 18, 1968 ⁶

⁵ US Census Statistics 2011

⁶ UNESCO Scale of Assessment

eating that's on the rise throughout the developing world, will take a greater toll on the world's resources than one that revolves around unrefined grains, nuts, fruits, and vegetables.⁷

Gastronomy has become an essential element of tourism with the rise in food tourists, This ultimately, while there are many incentives for tourism and travel, the enjoyment of good food is always an essential component of the experience. Creativity and diversity are key components of this experience. If nutritional food and gastronomic food are to fulfil their potential in providing a good tourism experience, it is vital to create an appropriate education and culture.

This decade has seen a progressive global recognition of culture as an integral factor in sustainable development, as proven by an increasing number of reports, statements and commitments from international institutions, national and local governments, as well as civil society actors, experts and other stakeholders. Likewise, as trends towards urbanisation increase in all world regions and as the economic, social, political, environmental and cultural effects of globalisation became more visible at local level, the role of local governments as a fundamental actor in the national and international scene has become more important and visible, despite the diversity of institutional frameworks in which they operate.

As an example, the Agenda 21 for Culture (first adopted in 2004) has over the past decade served to stress the role of culture in fostering sustainable development. More than 500 cities, local governments and organisations from all over the world are currently linked to the Agenda 21 for Culture. The document has been adopted by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) as its reference document in the field of culture and is fast becoming a leading charter for local sustainable development.⁸

The European Parliament recently recognised the importance of food education in a REPORT ON THE EUROPEAN GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE: Cultural and educational aspects (2013/2181(INI)). It states that, "It therefore seems absolutely necessary, in 21st-century societies, for food and nutrition and taste education to be incorporated as an essential and compulsory component into the education systems of all European countries. This makes it vitally important for the EU to develop food and gastronomy education policies. It does not make sense for our students to dedicate years, months, days and hours to studying a multitude of subjects, without devoting the necessary time to learning how to eat, in all senses: nutritional, diet-related, social and cultural, sensory and gastronomic. This education cannot be simply theoretical, because all sensory topics need to be experienced and practiced. So, in addition to acquiring the necessary theoretical knowledge, our school children need to experience, practise and nurture taste, touch and smell, so that they can develop a sensory enjoyment of food which is also healthy.

The main objective of 21st century food culture and education must be to show and convince everyone, young and old, that it is not only possible but necessary to combine healthy eating with gastronomy."⁹

⁷ <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/foodfeatures/evolution-of-diet/> (accessed 3 March 2015)

⁸ http://www.agenda21culture.net/images/a21c/nu_eva-A21C/C21A/C21_015_en.pdf (accessed 3 March 2015)

⁹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A7-2014-0127+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> (accessed 3 March 2015)

And, of course the most notable intervention for supporting diversity has been UNESCO in the form of the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The UNESCO Convention is supposed to be a legally-binding treaty that gives a nation-state the right to intervene (through facilitation, tax measures or subsidies) in the 'cultural' market. It is meant as a counter-balance to free market logic -whereby free market logic might consume or annihilate diversity of cultural expression. The aim is to give consumers the possibility to choose from a wide range of cultural expressions.

Unfortunately the convention is not specific to food and food is not mentioned at all in the convention, however food could be considered in Article 1 - Objectives (g) to give recognition to the distinctive nature of cultural activities, goods and services as vehicles of identity, values and meaning;

Also Article 14 - Cooperation for development holds an important principles for food and cultural diversity:

(iii) enabling the emergence of viable local and regional markets

While the Convention doesn't specifically mention food diversity it could be important to defend regional food diversity in the future but only if legally it stands above free trade agreements. We are at a pivotal point where all this work could be ruined (see chapter on TTIP and CETA) because freetrade zones being proposed would have higher legal status than the Convention. Ethical food tourism strategies could provide a much rosier future but will we be too late?

This paper was written in 2015 for the "Food and Cultural Diversity IGCAT Trends Report 2015 - Volume 1"

IGCAT's mission is to empower and facility local communities to realise the potential of their distinct food, culture, arts and sustainable tourism and local resources.

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