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Why We Can't Separate Justice and Sustainability in the Food System

Rafter Ferguson, Scientist, Food and Environment | January 31, 2019, 11:47 am EDT

Most of us wish we could eat with the confidence that everything on our plate has a story we can feel good about, a story about taking care of both people and the environment. In the food system (as elsewhere) these twin issues, justice and sustainability, have often been talked about as if they were unrelated, independent problems with separate solutions.

This disconnect has consequences. Our understanding of the connections between justice and sustainability shapes our work in the food system and determines our chances of making real progress toward our goals. We know that industrial agriculture–large-scale, highly mechanized monoculture farming systems making intensive use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers–does not meet these aspirations. We know that the food system with industrial agriculture as its foundation does not protect the environment, does not protect human health, and doesn't produce enough nutritious food or distribute it equitably. Sustainability and justice are connected, in part, because injustice and

environmental degradation are connected. And if we don't see the connections between the problems, we're unlikely to see how the solutions must be integrated.

This disconnect has been on my mind since I became interested in sustainable agriculture in the early 2000s. It was then I started to find a lack of conversations that fully integrated concerns with treating people fairly and the earth gently. I got so curious about these missing connections that I eventually went back to school and became a political agroecologist. If you're wondering what the heck that is, you're not alone! It boils down to this: I study sustainability and justice in the food system. Of necessity, my training and my research have been very cross-disciplinary, incorporating agronomy, ecology, and social sciences. It's a challenging, rewarding, and occasionally crazy-making arena to work in.

And a few months ago I came to work at UCS, because it's a place where I can continue working toward a food system that takes care of people and the earth. And while we've seen increasing understanding in recent years that treating people well is closely intertwined with treating the earth well, there is still a lot of work to do.

Two problems with one painful history

In fact, injustice in the food system has always had implications for sustainability. The rise of industrial agriculture is not just a story of technological change. It is that, and it's also inextricable from a long and grim history of theft and violence. I'll trace the outlines of some of these connections here.

The story of our country's origins is full of both heroic struggles and unspeakable atrocities, side by side. Like many others, I'm still working to understand the full import and legacy of those atrocities–chief among them, colonization and slavery. Something that's easy to miss is how the story of their terrible human toll is also a story of changing land use. The Europeans who colonized North America stole land from a tremendous diversity of peoples and communities, each with their own sophisticated understanding of how to grow food and manage landscapes that, with few exceptions, allowed them to provide for their needs without degrading the soils, rivers, and forests on which they depended.

When colonists displaced indigenous communities, they also replaced indigenous land management with European agriculture–notably, wholesale clearing of forest followed by intensive use of the plow. While the indigenous Wampanoag people kept early colonists in the northeast from starving by generously sharing their own locally-adapted crops and techniques, colonists would integrate these practices into their own approach to farming and launch a process of unprecedented deforestation, soil degradation, and soil erosion. Plugged into the international trade of the emerging capitalist economy, profits from these destructive practices would in turn drive the ongoing seizure of land and violent removal of the indigenous inhabitants.

Beginning in the 1600s, this ongoing expansion was powered by forced labor: first with indentured servants from Europe, then increasingly with the labor of enslaved African people. The production of commodity crops such as wheat, corn, tobacco, and cotton spread through the 1800s as the influx of slave labor multiplied the profits of plantation owners and merchants. Following the abolition of

slavery in 1865, sharecropping kept profits flowing while prolonging the servitude of many formerly enslaved people. At the same time, the footprint of colonial agriculture spread west along with a flood of settlers, enabled by the violent displacement of indigenous people, and extending the footprint of destructive agricultural practices.

More machines, fewer (and whiter) farmers

Sustainability, of course, is relative, and the environmental impacts of pre- and early 20th century agriculture can sometimes seem almost idyllic in retrospect. Since larger and more mechanized farms require fewer and fewer farmers, the rise of industrial agriculture is also the story of the depopulation of the farming sector. Government policies favoring larger farms enabled decades of consolidation, forcing out small and medium-sized farmers who found it impossible to compete with the emerging well-subsidized industrial farms.

The pressures of consolidation have fallen heavily across all small- and medium-sized farms, but racism and sexism throw more and higher barriers in the path of farmers who aren't white and male. In addition to the many hurdles created by interpersonal discrimination, racism and sexism have often been expressed through the very institutions intended to support farmers. Institutional racism and sexism at the USDA have long made it harder for black, Hispanic, indigenous, and women farmers to access the resources and support vital to the survival of smaller farms, as shown in a series of successful class action lawsuits in the 1990s and 2000s. The slow pace of reform to antiquated property laws that disproportionately affect the descendants of enslaved African people has helped drive massive land loss in the black community throughout the 20th century.

Optimized, streamlined, and decimated

The sum of all these pressures has left us with a depopulated farming sector dominated by industrial agriculture. As a result, diverse mosaics of annual and perennial crops and wild plants have been replaced with large uniform blocks of homogenous annual crops, the soil pummeled through the growing season with heavy plowing, fertilizers, and pesticides, then left bare and exposed to the elements through the cold season. As wild landscapes and biologically diverse agriculture disappear, so do the critical environmental services on which agriculture and all of us depend: water filtration, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation, and carbon sequestration, among others.

And while I'm focusing on the agricultural end of the food system, the linkages between sustainability and justice are present throughout the food system. While displacing forms of agriculture, we've also displaced food cultures—of distribution, preparation, and consumption. The systematic segregation of poor communities and communities of color from affluent and white communities creates the conditions for a literal food apartheid: fresh and minimally processed foods are sold at high prices for select markets that are geographically and economically inaccessible for the marginalized communities, who in turn provide a captive market for the highly processed and refined products of industrial agriculture. These apartheid conditions, the attendant loss of culinary and nutritional knowledge, and

the staggering rise of diet-related health problems, are all symptoms of a food system designed for profit rather than care.

We need everyone at the table

As the problems are related, so are the solutions—and our strategies must reflect that. First and foremost, let's do away with the idea that anyone could build a sustainable food system without centering social justice in the process. Only a broad and deeply inclusive coalition will bring enough of us together to marshal the kind of political power needed to change the status quo. Only a movement that acknowledges these legacies and prioritizes the voices of those who've been marginalized in the current food system will be able to assemble such a coalition.

Furthermore, only such broad and deep coalition will give us the insight and depth of perspective we need to create truly workable solutions. When people are left out of shaping the solutions to the problems they face, the solutions fail. To make a new food system we need everyone at the table.

Sustainability without justice… isn't

There is good reason to doubt that a food system that is environmentally righteous but unjust could be anything more than a passing fantasy. The most ecologically elegant food system that *leaves people out* is just creating the building blocks for a new round of environmental harm. What are those building blocks? I'll give some examples below, and follow each with a question that invites us to imagine an alternative—to imagine the consequences of not leaving anyone out.

- Workers who have no choice but to sell their labor to destructive and extractive industries.

What would farming look like if every farmworker had alternatives, and the political capital to refuse to be exposed to dangerous pesticides?

- Customers who have no options but to buy the cheapest food.

What would happen to the market for unhealthy processed foods if everyone had access to fresh and healthy whole foods, throughout their lives?

- Communities who can't defend themselves against the toxic byproducts and other consequences of industrial agriculture.

How could polluting industries continue if they had nowhere to pollute—i.e. if every community had the clout to refuse and reject the byproducts of those industries?

- Farmers who can't afford to stay on their land.

How would industrial farms acquire land and undercut competition without the policies that favor them at every step—i.e., if all farmers received the support that they needed?

In short, an unsustainable food system requires a steady supply of *people without options.* We all need a food system that *creates* options for people, and doesn't leave anyone out, in order to ensure real and lasting sustainability.

How do we do that? Luckily, there is nothing that needs to be invented from scratch. Some of us are already doing it—and if you are, *thank you.* For those of us just finding our way to this work, our job is to seek out the farmers, activists, and entrepreneurs on the front lines of the struggle to remake the food system, and learn from them. Our job is to center the perspectives of communities who've been pushed to the margins of the food system, and to lift up the voices of people on the front lines: people of color, indigenous people, small farmers, farmworkers, and workers from all across the food system. Many of us will not have to look very far—the front lines may run through our own communities or our own backyards. For those who, like me, have never had to face the daily struggle of poverty, or have never been targeted by white supremacy—we will have to work harder and look farther to do the vital listening and learning that's needed. It's worth doing.

Then it's just a matter of *get in where you fit in*. Transforming the food system requires work on many fronts: organizing workers and communities, political campaigning, lobbying lawmakers, research and education, along with the central, core work of growing, distributing, and preparing food—just to name a few! For us here at UCS, we work to learn from our grassroots coalition partners through ongoing dialogue, in order to shape and re-shape our research, analysis, and advocacy. There is no shortage of ways to get involved or work to do.

On whatever front we work for food system change, we are called to stay conscious of the inseparability of sustainability and justice—in our history, in the present, and in our strategies for transformation.