Taking Back Our Food - Dealing With Hunger And The Land

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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The housing crisis -- foreclosures, homelessness, renters cutting rents, disappearance of credit, slowdown in construction and home-buying -- has gotten much more attention than the food crisis. The growth economy and Wall Street's "financial instruments" have been more important to corporate media and politicians beholden to their more affluent constituents. And rising hunger can be silent, for a time.

But food is coming on strong as more serious: people can double up in a bed to stretch housing, but a plate of food split two ways means two still-hungry people.
One billion people already go without sufficient food daily, a 1-7 ratio. In the U.S. it is 1-6, with record high Food Stamp reliance. One in four U.S. children are "food security at risk" (hungry). Trends indicate things will get worse before they get better: in the U.S., soaring farm values reflect that crop prices have risen because demand for food is growing around the world, while the supply of arable land is shrinking. In Iowa, 25 percent of farmland buyers are investors, double the proportion 20 years ago.

The food crisis and the housing crisis are really one. Over recent centuries, privatizing property has cut billions of people off from a direct connection to the land. When people lose the security of an ancestral home and are robbed of the right to hunt, gather and farm, cities of worker-slaves must toil to pay rent and buy food. Sometimes ancestral homes are given up voluntarily, but the image of benign, romantic migration is an exaggeration. Land grabs, cash-crop deals with foreign powers and transnational corporations (e.g., Walmart) have disrupted and and killed millions of people in recent decades. The more population grows, the harder it is for people to get along and share. Fences go up and the commons are stolen by the greedy few -- the hallmark of Anglo-American culture (i.e., The Enclosure). Bye-bye free food. Until...?

Besides housing, the other major expense for the majority of people in a market economy is food. Food has in recent years become expensive on a record pace. There are sporadic shortages due to climate-change related disruption in farming. Petroleum is the more direct, constant factor in rising food prices. The exact nature of the factors involved, including how may migrant workers are harvesting crops, will not matter much to a hungry population.

There will be food riots in the U.S., but another form of food-shortage violence will be less noisy: someone goes to a house with a gun and demands food. No riot.

Abroad, where people are more apt to protest openly but do not have guns for when TSHTF (the schidt hits the fan), food prices can mean riots. The New York Times observed when the Arab Spring cranked up,

"Riots and demonstrations erupting across the Middle East are not directly inspired by rising food prices alone, experts noted, but that is one factor fueling the anger directed toward governments in the region. Egypt was among more than a dozen countries that experienced food riots in 2008." The same article noted, "Food prices are not only rising, but they are also volatile and will continue this way into the future." - Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the World Bank managing director.

Back in the home of the Whopper and Big Mac, there is relatively little cohesion among social groups such as the family, and there is major political dissension. But food is common to all of us, and will be the biggest issue soon enough. When that happens, there will be no "Left" or "Right" or "liberal" or "conservative." Everyone needs food, but the disagreement is over doing something about the crisis: is it a shortage of food, or could we have a more long-term growing challenge: a longage of people?

The dominant culture tells its followers that all one has to do is be rich or work harder in order to buy everything (including food). But independent-minded people see through this, and believe in community gardens, converting lawns to food gardens, and want more farmers markets. Such folk support aid to the poor including the movement Food Not Bombs, and are conscious of population growth. And sometimes, they notice the overcrowding couched in modernity. But whether one is of this class of people, or the class of dutiful consumers, no one is oblivious to expensive food -- where can it end?

According to the June 15 Consumer Price Index released by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of fuel has increased 21.5 percent in the past year. As the cost of fuel rises, additional input costs to food manufacturers often are passed on to the consumer [source, "Cost of fuel increasing prices of food in Texas", Reporter News, Abilene, Texas, July 3, 2011]

When food violence comes to your town, it will not be called "peak oil" except perhaps by some who have noticed for years that we are Eating Oil (a book by petrochemist Maurice Green, 1978). Today, roughly ten fossil fuel units are used to produce one unit of food energy. In addition to food production's petroleum dependence, the transportation involved for the average U.S. piece of food is 1,500 miles from farm to plate. Then there's the processing, packaging, refrigeration and cooking of food -- something the average modern person takes for granted as a normal aspect of daily life. But all these things have a cost, both a financial and an energy-intensive, ecological cost. Nonetheless, the food crisis brewing today will not be blamed on our oil addiction or on major oil companies' profiteering.

Nor will people blame famine or food-riots on meat eating or factory-farm animal farming. Hungry and starving people will eat what they can eat urgently, and at some point some of the meat will be of the two-legged variety. This can happen on a massive scale if society breaks down completely, which is the direction things are going in. Because although much food could be grown intensively, using John Jeavons' and Permaculture methods even in urban areas, the preparation for urban farming is not being made. Who is saving seed? When food stores are stripped of everything off their shelves, that is not the time to say "This driveway and that parking lot are a waste of space and soil, help me tear it up to plant a garden." Better late than never, but the point is that a year's preparation is necessary if mass starvation from petro-food dependence is to be avoided. If somehow it is avoided, a crash program to reduce the birth rate, as non-intrusively as possible, would be ideal -- but no politician dares discuss the whole subject.

Just as the waste of plant food and water on animal foods will not be an issue when food shortage hits hard, no one will be heard to exclaim during a food riot or when being accosted at the point of a gun for food, "Damn this overpopulation problem!" But if it were not for population growth (enabled largely by cheap energy and the wondrous uses of petroleum and petrochemicals), there would be no food crisis. The food crisis is bubbling under the surface as consumers cope the best they can. They were able to cut back on driving, which they have done this year compared to last, due to higher gasoline prices. But cutting back on food is more difficult.

Eat better for less money and less cooking

People try their best in a difficult economy to eat only the things they want, without frills or without so many restaurant meals, but they may not understand the advantages of buying whole grains and beans in bulk. A meal of organic beans & rice dish from bulk ingredients, with no meat, can cost only a half dollar (besides the cost of the stove's use or the one-time purchase of salt, pepper, etc.). The beans & brown rice meal is much less expensive than eating at a McDonald's "restaurant," and much more nutritious and safe to eat. One can substitute millet or corn or other grain for the rice, and use various kinds of beans or peas or lentils. If the hypothetical beans and brown rice are first soaked several hours, their food value is raised due to enzyme activation. And if the grains and beans are allowed to sprout, this is perhaps the most nutritious way to eat them, with no cooking cost. If there is no fuel for cooking, then sprouting will be more common. Or we can do as the Haitians have done, post-forest, to dig up any roots to use for fuel.

In 1981, the Kushi Institute of Europe, a Macrobiotic Diet group, stated that in the area of energy or fuel required for food,

...production, processing, and preparation of animal foods consumes approximately 14 percent of the national energy budget, which is roughly equivalent to the fuel needed to power all our automobiles, only a little less than our total oil imports, and more than twice the energy supplied by all our nuclear power plants.

As for materials,

...processing and packaging of animal foods uses large amounts of strategically important and critically scarce raw materials including aluminum, copper, iron and steel, tin, zinc, potassium, rubber, wood, and petroleum products. These resource uses are a big reason why 90 percent of our grains and legumes and approximately one half of the fish catch is fed to livestock, while 800 million people are going hungry.

There is hope for better land & water use through awareness, but the picture has worsened over the last thirty years. As population went up, and the trend for more animal consumption soared in China, all the energy and materials issues were only more exacerbated. The advantages of dietary change and raw-versus-cooking are only the beginning of solid steps toward individual and regional food security. But before we give you the more improvements on business-as-usual, we must again address

... the roots of the problem

Our social organization deprives the overpopulation from not just sharing efficiently and fairly, but fuels the consuming frenzy of devouring limited resources. So our social organization needs to return to the ethic of the common good, or the needs of the group or tribe. Survival of the cooperative and symbiotic is easy, but not that of the disharmonious. Unjust ownership and hoarding by the wealthy is a system that cannot last, as we are seeing.

In the absence of open planning, food will become so expensive that people will be taking food rather than buying it -- until they can grow their own. So we have two seemingly opposing concepts: collapse and renewal, sometimes seen as "negative" against a "positive" outlook. But the way we are going, renewal is being postponed post-collapse.

Daniel Quinn made clear in his Ishmael series of books that today's dominant culture uniquely "locks up the food." This goes to the essential flaw of the dominant culture: it dominates. It is not "Live and let live" but "Get in line, or else!" How free people were herded to gradually becoming controlled slaves -- to be forced to work or earn money to buy what Mother Earth freely provides -- is the greatest crime and cruelest joke in the history of humanity. Also known as civilization, particularly the strain descending from Sumeria, the system of violence, authoritarian religion and propaganda was primarily for herding free people. Why this was done by the herders of people -- the elite priesthood, the "royal families" -- was for reasons of greed, fear and hate.

Nothing has changed today when we consider the ways of the super wealthy today, who profit off war, shortages, and the cancer-like expansion of an anti-ecological economy. Sumeria's rulers made sure the slaves and workers took over wildlife habitat to over-produce crops to meet the elite's demand for surplus, accomplished through over-irrigation that salted up the soil. Quinn called this way of life "totalitarian agriculture" whereby nearby people's pastoral lands were taken by invasion. It was totalitarian from a species-ethics perspective too, as just the few number of plants that certain people wanted were grown -- like cash crops are grown today in places that formerly were self-sufficient with local food production.

During the 2008 world food riots, Culture Change said "The empire of cheap food is crumbling. It is time to consider that the stage has been set for petroleum-induced famine." [You. Will. Not. Be. Able. To. Get. Food. - June, 2008, by Jan Lundberg] It's not that we want collapse, but we don't see the good indicators on the rise, such as much, much more urban gardening. Not only are intelligent people having trouble curing the mentality that has them unthinkingly driving to the store to buy lemons -- when he or she might pick one off a branch on a stroll down the street -- we are up against cornucopians.

The late Julian Simon and Herman Kahn said in 1984, regarding the summary of The Global 2000 Report to the President, (paraphrased) "If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be less crowded (though more populated), less polluted, more stable ecologically, and less vulnerable to resource supply disruptions than the world we live in now. Stresses involving population, resources, and environment will be less in the future than now... The world's people will be richer in most ways than they are today ... The out look for food and other necessities of life will be better ... life for most people on earth will be less precarious economically than it is now." Simon and Kahn represented the dominant narrative of progress and abundance occurring despite social inequity and despite the law of entropy.

How to cope with the food crisis

Rather than an entire how-to for improved security through local food production (in addition to the aforesaid meat-reduction and raw food options), here are oft-neglected steps beyond the increasingly popular buy-local:

Pedal Power Produce is the use of bicycle carts and trailers to haul food from the farm to the farmers market, the sail transport craft, restaurants, etc. If no fuels are available for motor vehicles, and if roads are not in good shape for the food trucks that helped wear out the roads, then low-tech means of transport come to the fore. Since Pedal Power Produce cropped up in 1997 in Humboldt County, California, there have been similar projects. One that operates today as a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture, or subscription-supported growing), is Freewheelin' Farm in Santa Cruz County, California.

How can food be moved further than bikes can pedal it? The Sail Transport Network proved, beginning in 2008 in the Puget Sound, that food can come from a distant place without trucks and petroleum.

Operating without an engine, the Whisper and other vessels used the wind and tidal currents to move organic produce regularly from the Olympic Peninsula to Seattle. Successful efforts continue to expand sail transport in various places.

Jeavons' Depaving Calculations:
John Jeavons, global biointensive-farming guru from Willits, visited Arcata to lecture at HSU in 1998. His electrifying presentation alerted everyone to the common threat of topsoil depletion and population growth. He easily convinced the audience that growing "organically" does not suffice when outside inputs from afar are depended on. Growing soil is the goal, and if this is followed, then crops will be sufficient -- with no outside energy or materials. Jeavons offered to Pedal Power Produce that if we sent any city's statistic of paved surface, and the population size, he would calculate how much

depaving would be required for a city's local self-sufficiency!

You don't want to rip people off:

What wild foods are available today, in or near urban areas? A small but growing number of people is becoming more aware of the joys of foraging. This may not be keeping pace with the number of babies still being born to consumers content with shopping for increasingly expensive food. But knowledge can save you, whether when finding yourself hungry out in nature, or when the food trucks can't get fuel to keep rolling in to the supermarkets. Culture Change enlisted journalist Rebecca Lerner to carry out two experiments in 2009, one week each, on eating only wild foods in and around Portland, Oregon. (see link below). Recently I have become enamored of manzanita berries, a California and U.S. Southwest wild food. The bark is beautiful, twisted and red for this shrub, similar to the madrone (arbetus) tree. Manzanita means little apple in Spanish, so that gives us a clue as to its edibility. In the case of this food, "size does not matter," as the profusion of tasty berries makes up for there tiny size.

Planting flowers, shrubs and trees wherever you might feel they belong, without asking permission or waiting for red tape, is the essence of guerrilla gardening. An example was my cousin and I planting a guava tree and a passion fruit tree in a large patch of invasive English ivy in Orange County. Technically we needed permission to do it. We also wanted to honor these particular trees, obtained as they were from Capt. Charles Moore's garden. The trees are just far enough from the wall separating the property from the boulevard that passersby cannot reach up an take half the fruits. What we should probably do is plant more such trees -- even bananas grow there in much of southern California -- so that passersby and neighbors can share in the bounty. But why do people care when there's a handy Trader Joe's right nearby? If pillaging of stores happens, the next stage would be that all wild and garden/farm food plants, plus dogs and other animals, are consumed fairly soon.

Since the food trucks are still rolling in, and you can drive if necessary to go buy seeds, starts and saplings, do so -- but go for the permaculture approach. This is truly intelligent design. It means planting and providing water and fertilizer with the minimum of work for long-term, sustainable harvesting. It often means your yard will have chickens or even a goat. And even a vegan has to admit that local, compassionate-animal husbandry makes more sense environmentally and health-wise than getting some GMO tofu, processed with sugar perhaps, packaged in plastic shipped a great distance. In addition to permaculture, a garden can benefit from rain catchment, composting, diluted urine as a fertilizer, a greywater system, and biochar. There is no waste in nature; modern humans have invented waste, in the greedy pursuit of wealth -- and does it ever hurt.

The idea of taking back the food would seem puzzling for primitive peoples or anyone living in a rural, traditional culture. But in the U.S.A, where we ate up the image of individual power through personal wealth, we are just starting to see that nature is not a machine, or that agriculture should not be the use of land to soak up petroleum to yield a little food energy. If food should not be sold, is stealing it immoral? Perhaps not, if one can't afford food and must eat. Currently, in the U.S. a food robber will be shot in the back or go to prison far more likely than the fat bankster cat who played the system and took food off the plates of millions to enrich himself. Perhaps the food riots will be directed in part at the rich, not just because the food is there, but to settle a score. Such an approach does not build a sustainable culture, but if we cannot plan as a society to prevent violence, we should probably anticipate upheaval and surprises such as widespread involuntary fasting.

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Background on "eating oil":

The modern food and agriculture system uses vast amounts of oil and other fossil fuels. This includes the energy used in the manufacture of heavy farm equipment, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and in processing and refining. The two major users of energy are the meat and meat products industry and the sugar industry followed by the beverage and soft drink industry. Altogether, per capita use of energy for modern food production and processing comes to the equivalent of 375.4 gallons of oil per year, or about 1 gallon of gasoline a day.
Source: Maurice Green, Eating Oil: Energy Use in Food Production (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1978).

Background on urban foraging and primitive skills:
Day Seven: Wild Thanksgiving and Final Thoughtsby Rebecca "Wild Girl" Lerner, 28 November 2009. Becky's previous experiment in the spring of 2009 for Culture Change: Survival Challenge: Can a City Girl Live Off Wild Food For a Week in Portland?
and Week of Wild Food - Day One. "Primitive Skills" Offer Sustainable Model. All by Rebecca lerner.

Guerrilla Gardening Gets Going, Culture Change,
July 28, 2009

More references and further reading:

(Video) 15 % Of U.S. Families Suffer From "Food Insecurity." Nov. 15, Associated Press

Enclosure, Wikipedia

The Diggers in 1649 were ecological communists fighting the Enclosure. Co-founder Gerrard Winstanley declared that "true freedom lies where a man receives his nourishment and preservation, and that is in the use of the earth."

As food prices rise, investors plow money into Midwestern farms, by Bernard Condon, Associated Press Business Writer, July 15, 2011

Cost of fuel increasing prices of food in Texas, Reporter News, Abilene, Texas, by Jerry Lackey, July 3, 2011

Behind the Rising Cost of Food by Kim Severson, April 23, 2011

Food Prices Worldwide Hit Record Levels, Fueled by Uncertainty, U.N. Says
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You. Will. Not. Be. Able. To. Get. Food. - report on trends by Jan Lundberg

Car Sleepers - The New American Homeless, July 11, 2011, TruthisTreason.net, by Kevin Hayden. Source: BBC

Pedal powered farms and factories, May 25, 2011

Pedal Power Produce - organic food hauled by bike cart without oil

Pedal Power Produce demonstrates the sustainable transport of food without pollution or dependence on fast diminishing global oil supplies. Humboldt County, California, 1997-2003

The Biochar Solution, by Albert Bates, 2010, New Society Publishers

Freewheelin' Farm - bike carting food near Santa Cruz, Calif.

Sail Transport Network

John Jeavons' biointensive gardening

Targeting Gaps in the Food Supply Chain - Going Beyond Agricultural Production to Achieve Food Security, by Worldwatch Institute, July 13, 2011

Downplaying overpopulation in order to sound positive and be solutions-oriented? "Agriculture Offers Huge Opportunities for a Planet of 7 Billion" worldwatch.org