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A global perspective: Towards a healthy, fair and sustainable food system

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Introduction

The global world we live in is made to seem smaller by technology but also by the realisation that the way we live and behave has consequences elsewhere, news is instantaneous with food and humanitarian crises being reported as they happen. For food this requires us to behave as global citizens and be cognisant of how our behaviours impact on others but also how our governments and private companies conduct trade with emerging economies. The Australian Government and the Australian food industry are planning encroachments into the growing SE Asia food market. Australia sees itself as the food bowl of SE Asia in the Asian Century (Gillard. 2012; The Australian, 2013). The Australian National Food Plan (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2013) envisages the production of more meat, fat, salt and sugary products for export, thus exporting chronic diseases via dietary intake. While at the same time the proposal is to cut aid to some of these same developing economies that it is proposed to export food to. Australia is no different from most developed economies with food plans based on export and trade and not linked or tied to sustainability or healthy eating policies (Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, 2013; Friel, 2010; Friel, Barosh and Lawrence, 2013: Caraher, 2013).

This article explores the place of developed economies in the global food economy and attempts to ground this by relating some of the issues to the Australian context and the changing food climate.

Power and Control and Inequity in the Food Chain

Globally power is concentrated in a small number of companies; it is estimated that 20 major companies control up to 80 per cent of the global food trade (Lang et al. 2009, Caraher 2011; Caraher and Reynolds, 2005). Why does this matter? It matters because this gives these corporations power over the food chain from what is produced, prices paid and what and where it ends up on shelves. It allows them to control the prices growers receive for their goods based on market economics and without reference to what is fair and equitable.

This concentration of power can be further represented by a global north/south divide with the major international companies being based or originating in the rich global north, controlling those who produce food (often in the global south) and influencing the choices of those who consume (the industry calls this latter phenomena choice editing). Hence, key impacts of globalization of the food system include: (i) Development of large multi-national companies who control what is grown, where it is grown/distributed, prices, (ii) Loss of biodiversity, (iii) Homogenisation of culture, and (iv) Less emphasis on public health.

All this reflects a paradox in food production which is left to our own devices: we will eat virtually all of what we like ‘a lot’, about half of we like ‘a little’, and almost none of we like ‘at all’ – this holds true at a production level, resulting in a narrower range of food products and a loss of biodiversity as a smaller range of crops are cultivated; figure 1 shows this with the big three crops of rice, wheat and maize accounting for over 85% of all grains grown and 30 crops accounting for 90% of all plant based calories and protein

intake. The irony with globalization is that as our choices have increased our dependence and tastes for a small number of crops has also increased. At an individual level increased choice provides us with the opportunity to consume that which we like more often, it does not always increase our range of food, we can eat what we like to eat more often. So despite the apparent new food appearing in out shelves up to 12,000 products on supermarket shelves, we seem to be still dependent on a small core group of crops. Thirty crops now feed the world, providing 90% of all plant based calories and protein intake.

On a global level many products are now produced on a scale unimaginable twenty years ago. While the global population has doubled since 1950 consumption of meat has grown fivefold. The new emerging economies of China, India and Brazil seek to emulate the conspicuous consumption of the West, one area where this is apparent is in the increase in meat consumption among a bludgeoning middle class, with China currently consuming the dairy and meat equivalent to total global consumption in the 1970s. Do these trends matter? They matter in that they may not be sustainable and the solutions lie not in saying that the populations of China and India should not consume more meat but of the necessity for a global shift in food production and consumption patterns.

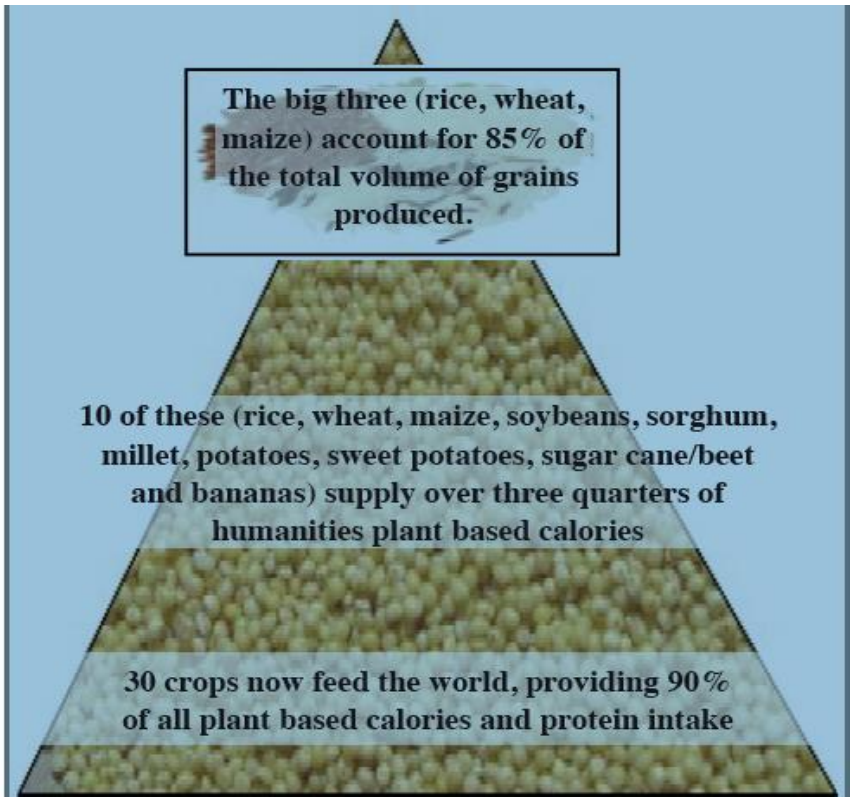

Figure 1 Global production of grains and crops (based on Weis, 2007)

The world we live in is one with dominant influences on food choice being trade, economic trade liberalization and profit (Monteiro and Cannon, 2012; Carolan, 2013). As such our current world is built on a model of increasing food production for health, whilst sustainability and equity are not central to this model (see our paper in JHEIA 2005 for a more in depth discussion - Caraher and Reynolds). This productionist model sees human health best served by an efficient and productive food chain built on a model of profit and the growth of corporations. The proponents of this model claim it addresses food security, but this is only valid in terms of the production of the total amount of food produced and the claim does not address issues of access or rights to that food (Sen, 1997). This is also underpinned by a global inequality where productionist model will not

address and may even widen inequalities in a world where: 5% of humanity consume 45% of all meat and fish, while the poorest 20% consume only 5%. These inequities are not subject to being addressed by the current food system (George, 2010).

Globally over one billion people will go to bed hungry tonight. In America 60 million people, mainly women, will go without a meal today, in the European Union this figure is 44 million with a further 80 million at severe risk. As food, fuel and housing costs rise, incomes remain stagnant thus placing great pressure on households to economise and food is one way that this can be done (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2012). Food poverty and insecurity in Europe is rising. In 2010, nearly one quarter of Europeans (116 million) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion with 43 million in food poverty (Eurostat, 2013). The figures for Australia are less clear but all the indications are that food insecurity is growing and not just among marginalised groups (Farmar-Bowars, Higgins and Millar 2013; Huntley, 2008; Anglicare, 2012). If we think of the world as a global table with ten people sitting down for a meal; organised by population 2 are Chinese, 2 are Indian, 1 is from NE, S and Central Asia, 1 from SE Asia and Oceana, 1 from Sub-Saharan Africa, 1 for the remainder of Africa and the Middle East, 1 for Europe and the last for south, central and North America. Yet if organised by nourishment one is hungry, two are obese, more than half eat a mainly vegetarian diet, with strict vegans occupying one seat, organised by consumption America occupies 3 seats (taken and adapted from Safran Foer, 2009).

This inequity is global with the newly emerging and under developed economies facing a double burden of disease with want (hunger/stunting) existing side-by-side with abundance (diseases of lifestyle/obesity). These disease of abundance and lifestyle are driven by the international trade system which contributes to the burden of chronic disease (De Schutter, 2011). This consumption is driven by affluence and the association of products such as meat with affluence, so people move from occasional consumption of meat and other products to regular consumption thus leading to increases in diet-related non-communicable diseases.

Australia as a global food power

Australian agriculture and primary industries are similarly built on a productionist model. While there are debates over the sustainability of Australian agriculture due to climate and weather as well as soil issues this is not the focus of this article and have been dealt with in detail elsewhere (see Caraher and Reynolds, 2005; Flannery, 2005; McMichael, 2003; Friel. 2010). So the principles are produce more, process raw food to add value and release to the market for consumers. The power and control are located with fewer and fewer big companies, as was noted earlier. This concentration of buying power, with fewer purchasers and fewer outlets results in the grower having less power (Monteiro and Cannon 2012). Instead it is left to the free market to provide (Moss, 2013).

The problem becomes one where public health nutrition concerns are subservient to those of business and trade (Moss, 2013 Caraher and Reynolds, 2005; Caraher 2013; Lustig, 2013). On the other hand, there are also problems when nutrition policy ignores or

neglects to account for wider impacts such as those on the environment so encouraging fruit and vegetable intake without consideration of the environmental impacts can be detrimental to the ecology (Friel, Barosh and Lawrence; George, 2010; Caraher, 2013).

So where does this leave us?

So the tension for food policies is to find a space between the issue of protecting the environment and contributing to health providing a just and fair food system for citizens while recognizing that the food industry seeks profits. Often this means finding solutions to the current dominant vertical global food supply system by looking at domestic production with more than an economic lens. More and more this perspective is finding a voice in the growing food sovereignty and democracy movements (Wittman et al 2011; Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance 2013). Le Gross Clark and Titmuss said in 1939:

> "*There are only two further ways of making food more available. The first is to lower the prices of foodstuffs upon the retail market; the second is to provide food to certain sections of the community through the medium of the social services. There is no reason, of course, why these methods should be mutually exclusive (page 166).*"

Like earlier movements in public health on tobacco and alcohol the focus has got to move to looking at the power relationships of big food producing companies (Tansey and Rajotte, 2008). For too long public health nutrition has focussed on the food products not the food chain or relationships of big food to supply/demand and health outcomes (Moss, 2013). Policy is not a logical process dictated by knowledge but a process subject to lobbying and power influences and big food producing companies are good at this (Moss, 2013). The 2009 report 'A Future for Food' from the Public Health Association of

Australia, raised many of these issues and called for a 'national integrated food policy' for Australia, which would involve all the food sectors including the food industry. The report highlighted a number of dilemmas for Australia which included questions about:

- the appropriateness of setting limits and foods to avoid,
- the balance between land to grow feed for animals and land to feed humans directly,
- the role Australia should play in addressing concerns re world population growth and the impact on food security.

Most of the existing national food policies that exist can be divided into two groups; the first are those that have nutritional health as their focus and the second group are agricultural/processing policies (Bronner, 1997; Milo and Heasling, 1998). The dangers inherent in both approaches are that there is little sense of joined-up policy. This is despite calls for the development of joint food and nutrition policies by the World Health Organization, following the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition. Egger and Swinburn (2010) make the link between the nutrition implications and the planetary ones in the subtitle of their book 'How we're eating ourselves and the planet to death'. The Australian policy eventually produced in 2013 (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (2013) -The National Food Plan - does not address the above concerns, it is a document dominated by the interests of primary industry, despite what some claim (see Boswell, 2013 for claims to the dominance of departments of agriculture and industry by environmental pressure groups). The national dietary guidelines likewise do not extend the dietary guideline recommendations so as to integrate environmental considerations within the scope of food and health. So here we have policy drift.

In Australian the new National Food Plan is essentially informed by productionist principles which will result in more exports of unhealthy products, while at the same time the issue of the sustainability and food security of Australian agriculture are not being addressed in favour of a short-term approach to profits (Schanbacher, 2010). So what should be done? All food should meet health, environmental and fair trade criteria we should not be creating separate products with a premium price which meet these criteria available to a few in society, sustainability is not a consumer product. We need to lobby and make people aware of the current inequities and hidden costs in the food system and that a just, fair and sustainable food system is a necessity for global stability.

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