

Creating Earth Charter Community Food Systems Starting at Homeⁱ

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At first thought, the mission of creating an *Earth Charter Community* might seem an impossible challenge – given the social, ecological, and economic situation of today's global society. The *Earth Charter*, a United Nations initiative, was turned over to the Earth Charter Commission in 2000 for administration.¹ It describes the “The current situation” as follows:

*The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species. Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened.*²

The Charter offers a ray of hope amid the gloom by concluding: *These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.* I agree: We live in perilous times, however, times of great peril can also be times of great opportunity. There is an ancient Chinese proverb: *May you live in interesting times!* Some say this proverb is actually a curse or at least a challenge. The Chinese symbol used for “interesting times” is also the symbol used for *crisis*, which is commonly interpreted by scholars to mean both danger and opportunity. Scholars tend to agree on the “danger” half of the Chinese symbol, but suggest the second half is interpreted most accurately as “a critical point in time.” A crisis then is a point in time when we are forced by perilous circumstances to make choices that will change the future, for either better or worse. I believe the tragedy in today's “global situation” presents an opportunity to create a new and better world.

The challenges confronting us today are great and cannot be met by simply fine tuning our current economic and political systems. This crisis will require revolutionary change. Throughout human history, society has gone through such times, when changes in thinking about how the world works and our place within it eventually changed virtually every aspect of human life. I believe the changes we are experiencing now are at least as important as those of the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s, and perhaps as important as the beginning of science in the early 1600s. I'm an old man and I have seen many changes during my 73 years. But, the changes I've experienced are not even remotely comparable to the changes I believe today's young people will see during their lifetimes. People who are born in the mid-21st Century won't be able to imagine the world of today.

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Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that we don't make “really big” changes such as those called for today unless three conditions exist. First, we have to become convinced that what we are doing now isn't working and isn't going to work in the future. It takes a major crisis to bring about fundamental change. But, that's not enough. We also must have a clear concept or vision of what we could do to make the current situation better. Without a clear vision of something better to change to, most people just keep on doing what they have been doing, even if it isn't working. Finally, we must believe that the something better is possible, even if not quick and easy. Most people do not pursue impossible dreams. We must have hope. Lacking any one of the three pre-conditions for change, most people will resist any major change.

Nowhere are the challenges or opportunities as great as in creating a sustainable global food system – and nowhere are the consequences of failing to do so as dire. However, we will not make the necessary changes unless we are willing confront the reality that today's global food system is hopelessly broken, that it is not sustainable. Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. The current food system is not providing enough food for many people of the world today, including many in the United States, and it most certainly is not leaving adequate opportunities for those of future generations to meet their need for food as well. Change in the global food system is no longer an option, it is an absolute necessity.

Nowhere is this lack of sustainability more clear – yet less understood and appreciated – than in the American food system. We are told by the agricultural establishment³ that our food system is the envy of the world. Americans spend less than 10% of their disposable incomes on food, less than in any other nation. American supermarkets are filled year-round with an abundance and variety of both fresh and processed food products from every corner of the earth. Why would we Americans want to change our food system?

First, the industrial food system has been an absolute failure in its most fundamental purpose of providing food security for the nation. Food security means that everyone has enough wholesome food to sustain healthy, active lifestyles, which is not the case today. A larger percentage of Americans are “food insecure” today than during the 1960s, with more that 20% of American children living in food insecure homes.⁴ In addition, those who can afford to buy enough food to satisfy their calorie needs are far less healthy. The only foods affordable to many lower-income families are high in calories and lacking in essential nutrients, leading to an epidemic of obesity and other diet-related health problems. Obesity-related illnesses alone are projected to claim about one-in-five dollars spent for health care in America by 2020 – erasing virtually all of the gains made in improving public health over the past several decades.⁵ We simply can't afford the costs of more cheap food.

Second, the current abundance of food has been brought about by the industrialization of agriculture. While the industrialization of agriculture has resulted in tremendous increases in economic efficiency and productivity, it has had many unintended ecological, social, and economic consequences that now threaten even the long run sustainability of food production.

The lack of ecological sustainability of our industrial food system is related directly to the basic principles of the *Earth Charter*: First, the principle of “respect for the earth and life and all its diversity” is directly in conflict with the basic characteristics of the industrial approach to food production. The industrial food system gives priority to the strategies through which it gains its economic efficiency, including specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. We see the consequences of this priority in the demise of small, diversified, independent-operated farms, which are replaced by large specialized, “factory-farms.”

In nature, the ecological principles of holism, diversity, and interdependence take priority over the efficiencies of specialization, standardization, and hierarchal control. Industrial agriculture reverses the priorities necessary for ecologically-healthy systems. We see the ecological consequences of this reversal of priorities in eroded and degraded soils, polluted steams and groundwater, depleted streams and aquifers, chemically-dependent monoculture cropping systems, and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations, all of which show utter disregard for the other living and non-living things of the earth upon which long run sustainability ultimately depends. We humans are but one of many species of the Earth and we are inherently interdependent with the other species within the whole of nature – ethically and ecologically as well as economically. Industrial agriculture places no value on anything unless it can be used to create something of economic value, regardless of its intrinsic value or value to the future of humanity.

With respect to the second *Earth Charter* principle, any responsibility to “care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love” has been systematically denied during the industrialization of agriculture. Economic value is inherently, “narrow-minded and shortsighted” because it is individual, impersonal, and instrumental. It is a means to a narrowly-defined individual end. It makes no economic sense to invest in anything if the benefits are expected to accrue to others or society in general or to those of some future generation. All economic value is ultimately derived from nature by way of society. Investments in sustainability must be “broadminded and farsighted.”

The industrial food system has proved to be a very efficient means of extracting economic value from the land and the people who serve it, but it provides no incentives to reinvest in either nature or society for the greater good of the community of life, either in the present or for the future. Scientific knowledge and understanding of food and farming have been used to consolidate economic power rather than care for the “community of life.” Economic opportunities accrue to “the few” while “the many” bear the inevitable social and ecological burdens. We see the social consequences in the demise of independent family farms and the decline and decay of rural communities. The quest for economic wealth and political power have taken priority over trust and kindness. Compassion and love have no economic value and thus are not valued in an industrial food system.

With respect to the third *Earth Charter* principle, the industrial food system does not contribute to communities that are “just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.” The lack of social justice in industrial agriculture extends beyond farming to the whole of rural communities and society in general. Rural neighbors of industrial farms are routinely denied their basic rights to a clean and healthy environment by so-called “right to farm” laws. These laws were never

meant to include the right to operate “farm factories,” which have been scientifically identified as clear threats to public health by highly-reputable public health institutions.⁶ As they are allowed to continue their pollution, the democratic rights of rural citizens to self-determination and self-defense are being systematically denied. Rural communities are being turned into dumping grounds for our industrial society, whether its prisons, landfills for urban wastes, toxic waste incinerators, or manure from large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. The social fabric of rural communities is being ripped asunder. This is not participatory justice, nor is it peaceful or sustainable.

Finally, with regard to the fourth *Earth Charter* principle, an industrial food system is quite simply not sustainable. It cannot “secure the Earth's beauty and bounty for present or future generations.” Industrial organizations seek to systematically remove all restraints or limits to their exploitation of land, water, fossil energy, or other natural resources that will be needed to ensure adequate nutrition for those of future generations. Industrial food systems are inherently dependent on affordable and accessible irrigation water and fossil energy, both of which are being rapidly depleted through extraction and exploitation. In addition, industrial agriculture is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions which threatens the future of humanity. It is not ecologically sound, socially responsible, or economically viable; it is not sustainable.

Unfortunately, the paradigm of agricultural industrialization is being spread around the world. Contrary to popular belief, the so-called Green Revolution did not feed the hungry of the world. It only fed those who could afford to buy food, and most people are still hungry because they are still poor. Displaced subsistence farmers, who were feeding themselves, were driven into urban ghettos, much as displaced farmers and farm workers contributed to U.S. ghettos in earlier times. Perhaps most important, economic industrialization is systematically destroying the values, traditions, and institutions that historically have motivated societies to conserve, protect, and renew the resources needed to sustain the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities. The culture of today's global food system is one of extraction, exploitation, and greed. This culture must not be allowed to survive this generation.

Admittedly, the industrial revolution brought many benefits to humanity and no one would willingly return to preindustrial ways of life. On the other hand, the industrialization of our food system, though well-intended, has been a dismal failure. Our industrial food system is not meeting the food needs of the present and certainly is not leaving equal or better opportunities for the future. It is not sustainable. It is destroying our future. Humanity can no longer afford to bear the ecological, social, and long-run economic costs. Fundamental change in our food and farming systems is not an option; it is an absolute necessity. We clearly have the first requisite for fundamental change.

The second requisite of a new vision for a new and better food system for the future is not quite so clear. The vision perhaps can be seen most clearly in today's sustainable agriculture movement. The sustainability movement includes farmers who call themselves organic, ecological, biodynamic, holistic, practical, innovative, or just plain family farmers. While their farming operations are unique, as are all things of nature, these farms have essential characteristics in common. They give priority to holism, diversity, and interdependence, over specialized, standardized, and hierarchically control. They understand, intuitively if not

explicitly, that everything of any use to humanity, including everything of economic value, comes from nature by way of society. They know they must continually invest in conservation and regeneration of both nature and society to ensure long-run economic viability of the system. They balance their need for economic viability with ecological and social integrity to achieve sustainability. They share a common commitment to creating a permanent agriculture that can meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future.

This new vision is evident at the dozens of sustainable agriculture conferences held annually all across the continent. Sustainable farmers are still a distinct minority, but their numbers are growing. At least eight “sustainable agriculture” conferences in the U.S. and Canada each draw more than 1,500 participants, with a few reaching 2,500 to 3,500. The larger conferences typically are organized by grass-roots farm groups and the vast majority of those attending are farmers and their customers. Sustainable agriculture conferences drawing 500-700 are far from rare and conferences drawing 100-250 people per year are too numerous to attempt to count, including conferences in virtually every state in the U.S. The size and numbers of such conferences has been growing each year.

Perhaps more important, these farmers are being supported by a growing number of allies among members of the general public. The issues of global climate change, fossil energy depletion, economic globalization, growing social inequity, corporate consolidation of the food system, confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs), genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and other more general food safety, health, and nutrition issues are creating a new sustainable/local food movement among people as consumers, taxpayers, and citizens. The Slow Food movement, for example, is a worldwide organization with about 100,000 members in over 150 countries. Slow Food's philosophy is defined by three interconnected principles: “Good: a fresh and flavorsome seasonal diet that satisfies the senses and is part of our local culture; Clean: food production and consumption that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; Fair: accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for small-scale producers.”⁷ *Good, clean, and fair* are becoming the watchwords of sustainable foods.

Growth in organic food sales is perhaps the most visible sign of growth in the sustainable food movement, even though organic foods still make up less than 5% of total food sales in the U.S.⁸ However, food industry studies indicate that about *one-third* of American consumers are willing to pay premium prices for healthful, nutritious foods with ecological, social, and economic integrity.⁹ The challenge is to make sustainable foods accessible and affordable, even though they need not be as convenient or cheap as industrial foods. The sustainable food movement includes tens of thousands of farmers and millions of other like-minded good-food advocates and activists across the American continent. The good food revolution is under way.

More recently, “local foods” have replaced organic foods as the most dynamic and fastest growing segment of the food system. While still only about one-fourth as large as organic sales,¹⁰ local foods may be even more important in creating the sustainable food system for the future. The sustainability of any food system will always be rooted in local communities, where there is a sense of connectedness among people and between people and the other living thing of the “earth community.” The viability of the local food movement can be seen in the growing number of farmers markets and community supported agricultural organizations or CSAs. USDA

statistics indicate the number of farmers markets in the U.S. increased from 1,755 to 8,144 between 1994 and 2013, increasing more than four-fold in less than 20 years.¹¹

Current estimates by the *Local Harvest*¹² organization indicate there are were 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.¹³ The 2007 Census of Agriculture indicated about 12,500 farmers had sold products through CSAs. This reflects the growing number of multi-farm CSAs, where farmers pool their production to better serve their members. Multi-farm CSAs and cooperatives such as *Grown Locally*,¹⁴ *Idaho's Bounty*,¹⁵ and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*¹⁶ range from local, to regional and state-wide in scope and offer a variety of local products under various purchase and delivery options. I believe these innovative *agripreneurs* who are forming multi-farm CSAs that evolve into local and regional food hubs or other cooperative organizations are creating the new vision for a national and perhaps global network of community-based food systems – the vision we need for sustainability.

But will such innovations be enough to revolutionize the food system? Do we have the final prerequisite for fundamental change: Do we have reason for “hope?” None of us has the power to change the entire world, but we do have the power to change our part of the world. The good news is that we individually can make revolutionary changes in “our world” anytime we choose. We don't have to wait for the rest of the world, our nation, or even our community to change. We can choose a better world for ourselves, regardless of whether the rest of the world changes. Furthermore, communities, nations, and global societies only change when people change – and people change one-by-one. Social change is sometime slow but also sometime fast or even explosive, but it is always one-by-one. Everything is interconnected; we are all parts of the same whole. As we change, our communities change, our nation changes, and even the world is inevitably changed. By changing *our* world, we change *the* world. In this there is hope.

People are taking advantage of this opportunity for change in all walks of life all around the world, including in educational institutions. Among the education-based initiatives, “Farm to School” programs have gained the most widespread public attention, as parents and teachers attempt to replace “junk foods” in schools with healthful, nutritious locally-grown foods in K-12 school cafeterias. Farm to School programs have grown from a few schools in the late 1990's to more than 10,000 schools across all 50 states.¹⁷ Colleges have been a bit slower to demand nutritious, local foods, perhaps because large fast-food marketing programs targeting young adults and entrenched economic relationships between college administrators and corporate institutional food providers. However, some college administrators and food providers have given in to student pressures and are sourcing at least some foods from local farmers. The “Farm to College” website reports responses from 191 colleges indicating some type of organized campus initiative to facilitate and encourage sourcing more foods locally.¹⁸

Farm to College food programs, along with food-waste composting, have proven to be ideal ways to stimulate broader student awareness of the fundamental problems in the U.S. and global food systems as well as the emergence of more sustainable, healthier food alternatives. Another means of stimulating student interest in the current food system crisis and opportunities is “student gardens.” Again, gardens at K-12 schools have gained the most widespread attention, but at least 100 colleges and universities have established community gardens on their campuses.

The purpose is two-fold: To supplement class-room education and to help build healthy “communities of interest” around a common commitment to *good, clean, and fair* food.¹⁹

Perhaps the most important aspect of the sustainable/local food movement in general is that it provides people with a logical reason and realistic opportunity to reconnect with other people and to reconnect with the earth. We are no less dependent on each other and on the earth than when we were hunters and gatherers; the connections are just more complex and less direct. We still need each other and we still need the things of the earth. No other initiative is as important to the future of humanity as the movement to create a new sustainable global food system. No other initiative has more potential for bringing people together around a sense of shared purpose and commitment to creating *Earth Charter Communities* than does the development of a sustainable, local, community-based food system.

The sustainable food movement is not just about reducing reliance on non-renewable energy, reducing wastes and pollution, and recycling natural resources. All of these things are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Sustainability will require a fundamental change in thinking about how the world works and where we humans fit within it, so we will know how we “should” live. It is about restoring “respect for the earth and life and all its diversity.” It is about “caring for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.” It will require commitments of communities and nations that are “just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.” Only then, will we be able “to secure the Earth's beauty and bounty for present ‘and’ future generations.”

The creating of *Earth Charter Communities* is about returning to the pursuit of happiness: The historic purpose of life. People throughout human history have known that beyond some fairly modest level of material well-being there is no relationship between further increases in income or wealth and increases in happiness or quality of life. Once our basic material needs are met, the quality of our life depends far more on the quality of our relationships – friends, family, community, society. We are social beings; we need to love and be loved. We are also moral or ethical beings. Our happiness depends on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. We need to feel that what we are doing is significant; that it's right and good. A multitude of social science studies related to wealth and happiness confirm our common sense.²⁰ Once our individual, tangible needs are met, the pursuit of happiness is about developing the social and spiritual dimensions of our lives. It's about caring for “the community of life.”

“All we have to do to create *Earth Charter Communities* is to finally become “fully human.” In this there is hope. In the words of Vaclav Havel – philosopher, revolutionary, and former president of the Czech Republic: *Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that [to others] seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.*²¹

I don't expect to see the current revolution completed in my lifetime. My hope today is in the millions of young people, all across this nation and around the world, who know that what we are doing is not sustainable, who are able and willing to help create a new vision of a better world for the future, and have the courage to pursue their passion for a new and better world. We all know that creating this new world will not be quick or easy, we may not be optimistic, but we know it's the only thing that makes sense; in this there is hope. And even if in the end we fail, while daring greatly, always remember: Life is simply too precious... to live without hope.

End Notes

- ¹ The Earth Charter Commission. <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Commissioners.html>
- ² The Earth Charter Initiative, Read the Charter, <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>.
- ³ The “agricultural establishment” refers to the large agribusiness corporations, agricultural commodity organizations, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and state Departments of Agriculture.
- ⁴ USDA, “Household Food Security in the U.S.,” ERS, Economic Research Report No 125, Sept. 2011. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR125/ERR125.pdf>
- ⁵ Rand Corporation, “Cost of Treatment for Obesity-Related Medical Problems Growing Dramatically,” *Rand Corporation*, <http://www.Rand.Org/News/Press.04/03.09.Html> .
- ⁶ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “Agriculture and Public Health Gateway,” Industrial Food Animal Production, <http://aphg.jhsph.edu/?event=browse.subject&subjectID=43> .
- ⁷ Slow Food International, <http://www.slowfood.com/international/2/our-philosophy>
- ⁸ Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA, “Organic Food Trends,” http://www.agmrc.org/markets_industries/food/organic-food-trends/
- ⁹ Allison Wortington, *Sustainability, the Rise of Consumer Responsibility*, The Hartman Group, Bellevue, WA, Spring, 2009. <http://www.hartman-group.com/publications/view/81> .
- ¹⁰ *Packaged Facts*, “Local and Fresh Foods in the U.S.,” May 1, 2007. ><http://www.packagedfacts.com/Local-Fresh-Foods-1421831/>>
- ¹¹ USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, “Farmers Markets and Local Food Marketing,” <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateS&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=WFMFarmersMarketGrowth&description=Farmers%20Market%20Growth> .
- ¹² Local Harvest, <http://www.localharvest.org/>
- ¹³ Debra Tropp, “Current USDA Research on Local Foods,” USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, May, 2009, <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5077145> .
- ¹⁴ Visit the *Grown Locally* website at <<http://www.grownlocally.com>>
- ¹⁵ Visit the *Idaho's Bounty* website at < <http://www.idahosbounty.org/>>
- ¹⁶ Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at < <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/>>
- ¹⁷ National Farm to School Network, <http://www.farmtoschool.org/aboutus.php> .
- ¹⁸ Community Food Security Coalition, *Farm to College*, <http://www.farmtoschool.org/aboutus.php> .
- ¹⁹ Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, “Campus Gardens: A ‘Growing’ Trend in Campus Sustainability,” <http://www.aashe.org/blog/campus-gardens-%E2%80%9Cgrowing%E2%80%9D-trend-campus-sustainability>.
- ²⁰ Ed Diener and Martin EP. Seligman, “Beyond Money, Toward an Economy of Well-Being,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5 (1), 2004, 1–31.
- ²¹ Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House inc.), 1990, Chapter 5.