

FOOD, FARMING AND THE EARTH CHARTER

By Dieter T. Hessel

In a rapidly warming world with drastically changing climate, chronic social turmoil, and growing populations at risk from obesity and hunger, it is crucially important to evaluate the quality and quantity of what people are eating or can't, as well as how and where their food is produced. At stake in this evaluation is the well-being of humans, animals, and eco-systems, or the near future of earth community!

Food production and consumption are basic aspects of every society's way of life, and sustainable living is the ethical focus of the Earth Charter, a global ethic for persons, institutions and governments issued in 2000.¹ The Preamble to the Earth Charter's Preamble warns us that "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," a reality that is now quite evident in the food and farming sector. Therefore, this brief essay begins to explore what the vision and values articulated in the Charter's preamble and 16 ethical principles offer as moral guidance for humane and sustainable food systems.

The prevailing forms of agriculture are increasingly understood to be problematic. Corporations and governments of the rich, "developed" societies have generated a globalized food system dominated by industrial agriculture or factory farming that exploits land, animals, farmers, workers consumers, and poor communities while it bestows handsome profits on shippers, processors, packagers, and suppliers of "inputs" such as machinery, fuel, pesticides, seeds, feed. We are learning the hard way that the results of "conventional" agriculture often are not good for people, small producers, land and water, habitats, species, or animals raised for food. Moreover, this unsustainable food system threatens the well-being of low-income communities and traditional cultures on every continent.

The Preamble to the Earth Charter envisions an alternative future of justice, peace and ecological integrity for "one human family and one Earth Community" with "a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms." It

¹ The text of the Earth Charter can be found at the web site: www.earthcharter.org

emphasizes that “the reliance of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air.”

The opening paragraph enjoins us to share “responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations,” by protecting human rights and meeting human needs through participatory government and an economy of sustainable production and consumption. In short, the Charter projects a future of “earth democracy” (to use Vandana Shiva’s term). The Charter’s alternative vision, animated by “the spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life,” gives earth community ethical primacy.

Now let’s see what the Charter’s integrated ethical framework of “interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life” implies or projects for food and farming. **Here I will read and apply Charter principles with critical consciousness² of what is going on, and ought to be fostered, in the production and consumption of food.** While particular details of food system problems and ways to overcome them vary by ecological and social region, there are underlying commonalities that the Earth Charter addresses saliently.

The principles or imperatives of the Earth Charter are organized in four interconnected parts. Note well that the overarching general principles in Part I anticipate the operational principles in Parts II, III, and IV. All 16 principles have important subprinciples that were included in the Charter after consultation with NGOs around the world. These subprinciples enrich thought and present guidelines for advocacy and action – here focused on ethical food production and eating. In what follows I show linkages between the general and the operational E.C. principles that speak to food system problems and how to overcome them. My purpose in doing this is to discern ethical standards for a sustainable, just and humane food system.

Principle 1, “**Respect Earth and life in all its diversity,**” has subprinciples emphasizing the interdependence and value of all beings, and the inherent

² Statements made in this brief article about the impact of industrial agriculture and factory farming, as well as the potential of humane sustainable food systems, are informed by current research summarized in *Earth Ethics*, 14,1 (Spring, 2006) published by the Center for Respect of Life and Environment.

dignity of humans. From the foundational first principle flow three more general principles that delineate human responsibility for otherkind, for other humans and for future as well as present generations. But before turning to principles 2, 3, and 4, let's notice how principles 12 and 13 state clear implications of the first principle.

In sharp contrast to industrial farming that degrades the environment and disempowers rural smallholders, principle 12 upholds the universal human right to “a natural and social environment supportive of human well-being.” This is crucial for all who want to, or still, live close to the land, but whose historic habits of food sufficiency are being severely undermined by corporate agriculture that controls land for export cropping. Over against this pattern, subprinciple 12, b asserts “the right of indigenous peoples (and minority communities generally) to their spirituality, knowledge, lands, and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.”

In a world where profiteering agricultural giants push people off of arable land, principle 13 goes on to emphasize the importance of participatory democracy and accountable governance, including “the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them...” (13,a); plus the right and responsibility of local groups and communities to care for their environments and to secure basic sustenance. (13,c-f) This has become all the more urgent as commodity speculation, corn ethanol diversion, and desertification of grazing producing areas have driven up commodity prices, making wheat, rice, and corn unaffordable to several hundred million more poor people.

Principle 2, “**Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love,**” has subprinciples asserting our duty to prevent environmental harm, protect the rights of people, and promote the common good. Everyone has responsibility, commensurate with their power or holdings, “to manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems (Principle 5,e). This, of course, is not characteristic of factory farming, which operates with heavy government subsidies, to exploit land, water, people and animals, and whose decision-making fails to address “the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.” (6,c). Much more

attention in farming and food processing and marketing needs to be paid to social well-being, human health effects, and environmental protection. (see 8,a-c)

Principles 1 & 2 together, are followed up in an unprecedented way by Earth Charter principle 15, “**Treat all living beings with respect and compassion.**” Here, for the first time a global ethics document affirms the importance of treating “kept” animals humanely. The subprinciples focus not only on protecting wild animals and preserving animal species, but also the imperative to “Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.” This requires, at a minimum, abolishing cages and crates as methods of confining laying hens, sows in gestation, and veal calves. These, of course, are the cruelly “efficient” ways that the Industrial Animal Production (IAP) process mistreats animals in facilities known as CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations).

While CAFOs produce large quantities of meat in a relatively short amount of time, they also generate large quantities (about 5 tons per person in the U.S.) of environmentally-polluting waste, including manure, urine, carcasses, excess feed, and feathers that pose a public health threat. In addition, the methods used by CAFOs directly threaten the health of workers at those facilities. Large CAFOs are often allowed by lax governments to operate without carefully informing their workers and nearby communities about toxic threats to public health, as well as air, land and ground water that factory farm facilities now pose. Indifference to or acceptance of what concentrated industrial animal production does to earth, people and intensely confined animals directly contradicts Earth Charter principles 6, a & b which assert the importance of preventing harm and taking a “precautionary approach” to agricultural development in an era of globalization. Action to eliminate public subsidies for IAP and to make responsible parties liable for serious harm will make a major difference, as can selective buying of alternative food products.

Principle 3, “**Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful,**” has subprinciples about guaranteeing human rights, promoting socio-economic justice, and “enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.” Earth Charter principle 9,a concisely lists basic human environmental rights,

including potable water, clean air, food security, and uncontaminated soil. Principles 9,b & c illumine the path to claiming these rights through “education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood,” and action to “protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer,” and enable their human development.

Local, sustainable and humane food production and consumption **is** the just and participatory alternative to factory farming. This alternative features ecologically benign organic crop production on family farms and animal-friendly husbandry: e.g., raising chickens and turkeys free of “battery cages,” not confining sows in gestation or farrowing crates, phasing out use of crates and tethering of calves raised for veal, and insistence on more humane, worker-friendly slaughter procedures.

Opportunities and technical support for communities to move in this alternative direction, coupled with fair trade rules and practices that support environmental protection, worker rights, and equality for women (who do much of the farming as well as food preparation in low-income communities around the world) deserve much more government and NGO attention. (See Earth Charter principles 10,b & c; 11,b)

Principle 4, “**Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations**,” has subprinciples that highlight the need to restrain our freedom of action for the sake of future generations, and to “transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of human and ecological communities.” These Earth Charter imperatives are in sharp contrast to profit-greedy production and self-indulgent consumption that show an unwillingness to restrain ourselves for the benefit of other people and the well-being of other creatures.

Long-term flourishing depends on adopting patterns of production and consumption that “safeguard Earth’s regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being” (principle 7), as well as “formal education and life-long learning [inculcating] the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life (principle 14). What humans eat and how that food is produced will have a major effect on the short and long-term flourishing of human and ecological communities. This becomes an even bigger concern as emerging middle class demand for meat and fast food increases exponentially in rapidly developing countries of Asia and South America.

If large segments of developing country populations try to eat a diet approaching the content of recent U.S. and Northern European diets, the world will have much more obesity, overstressed land and waters, and intensified competition for grain to feed factory-farmed animals instead of very poor people. And as communities of people who have traditionally done subsistence farming to feed their families are pushed off of arable land to make way for export cropping and meat production, the numbers of hungry and malnourished people will rise rapidly worldwide. Global warming further compounds this problem in its disproportionate impact on the same poor communities that have been trying to meet basic sustenance needs on the often degraded or marginal land still available to them. Consider the unsustainable near future of earth community if current food production and consumption patterns continue. Large scale environmental degradation and resource depletion caused by industrial farming, overfishing, deforestation, and global warming could make it impossible to feed everyone just a few short decades ahead.

So, we, along with relatively affluent citizens in every society, must restrain the habit of eating so high on the food chain and consuming food imports that are regionally out of season. We have a special responsibility to “adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.” **The positive agenda is to seek sustainable sufficiency for all by eating locally and mindfully.** That, among other steps toward sustainable living, would help to restore soul to any culture and strengthen the prospects for global food security.

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