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➤ ***Living and Working in a Sustainable Relationship with the Earth: Strengthening Community Capacity to Produce and Eat Nutritious Food – by Dorothy N. Gamble***

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**Introduction**

The negative impact on the environment of relying too heavily on fossil fuels and the excessive use of nitrogen has been well recognized. Those patterns are rapidly destroying fragile elements of the Earth's biosphere and ecosystems. The prospect of global environmental change is associated with major long-term risks and uncertainties for development, with profound social consequences. This sentiment of environmental anxiety has been well captured by ecologists (and shared by many other scientists) in the following way: "The Earth can live without us. We cannot live without the Earth" (Korten, 2014 p.14). Many environmentalists and other scientists have explored sustainability concerns in depth and have advocated a range of required changes in our behaviors and practices. Making conscious,

intelligent choices about how to live in a sustainable relationship with the Earth requires rethinking our association with the Earth's resources, including how food is produced, distributed and consumed. Not only "eco-philosophers" but also many skilled developers challenge us to find new approaches to food security that will help us improve our relationships with each other and with the Earth. New approaches and the accompanying "new stories" are required, because stories are one of the most useful mediums that humans have to describe their values, purposes in the world, contributions to humanity, and paths to the future. It is our stories that guide our behaviors all across the range of cultural traditions that exist in the world. This article focuses on civil society organizations' efforts to facilitate the production and distribution of food in the global quest for sustainability, biodiversity, and human security.

### **New Paradigms for Living with the Earth.**

Some current approaches relating to agricultural economics and the production and distribution of food are so embedded in our lives that we are unable to think more broadly and critically about their negative outcomes. Some critics, such as David Suzuki (2014), note that economies are nothing but human creations, and that if they are recognized as failing Earth communities by becoming more destructive than productive, they can be changed. Vandana Shiva (2005), physicist and environmental activist, working with global colleagues, has developed a ten-point "Earth Democracy" that provides direction for justice, sustainability and peace. In her view, it is the only way that will help save humanity as well as the Earth's resources. Another set of guidelines for reducing vulnerabilities to climate change and moving toward sustainable development originated at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development —Rio+20. In the process of that conference's preparation, contributions came from people on every continent and representing every major cultural and religious group, contemporary science, international law, global ethics movements, and best practices for contributing to sustainable development. An earlier initiative that helped to put forward ethical principles pertinent to the transition to sustainable ways of living was the creation of "The Earth Charter" launched in 2000. Guidance from the Rio+20 Conference and the Earth Charter

speaks directly to the importance of wise engagement with the food chain -- food production, distribution, and consumption.

It is well known that food for well-being begins with adequate calories and nutrition for effective brain and body development, but must also address the issue of access. Regrettably, food security remains an acute, primary concern for millions of people -- nearly 850 million people do not have a secure daily food source. In the USA, one of the richest countries in the world, nearly one in five people suffer from food insecurity, pondering the critical question where the next meal will come from. Food security is a multidimensional concept, and according to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, it is characterized by such aspects as "availability, access, utilization and stability" (FAO, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, 2013). Food security and access to nutritious food is connected to policies that embrace economic aspects, agricultural production and food distribution, access to water resources, land use, and the education of farmers, food handlers, and consumers. It is well recognized that lack of access to healthy and nutritious food is associated with low levels of health and well-being.

### **Think globally, act locally**

The need for new approaches to guide the production and distribution of food that is both nutritious and affordable to people, as well as sustainable and friendly to the Earth's resources, has been taken up in New Mexico, USA, by the nonprofit organization *Farm to Table* (FTT). In the desert south-west of the country, food insecurity is being targeted by FTT, whose goal is to increase the "availability of nutritious, affordable, locally grown and culturally significant food for the population of New Mexico and surrounding states" (Farm to Table, 2014). The core values of *Farm to Table* are linked to the fundamental recognition that food is a basic human right, while access to regionally grown, healthy and culturally relevant food is paramount to the well-being and sustainability of communities. They concentrate their efforts on developing capacities among producers, distributors, and consumers to grow, sell and eat local, nutritious and affordable food. By doing so, they enable local communities to connect with the larger concern for a living Earth. They build opportunities for

people to live and practice new approaches that are congruent with the protection and renewal of the Earth, her inhabitants and resources.

### **Building the Capacities of Producers, Distributors and Consumers.**

FTT's programs engage with farmers through outreach, education, networking and farmer-to-farmer workshops, promoting family farming and establishing farmers markets. Food Policy Councils, facilitated by FTT across the state of New Mexico help consumers, producers, health officials, policy makers, indigenous tribal representatives and others learn about the linkages between farming, food, health, schools, restaurants and regional economies. Educational efforts and networking opportunities are provided in a variety of FTT programs, including the New Mexico Organic Farming Conference and the Southwest Marketing Network. The Farm to Restaurant program works with restaurant chefs to purchase local foods and celebrate seasonal, fresh produce that needs to travel only a few miles to reach the consumer. The FoodCorp program, partnering with the University of New Mexico, recruits and hosts nearly a dozen community leaders, placing them across the state to teach children about the nature of healthy food and where it comes from, to help schools build and tend gardens, and to bring quality local food into public-school cafeterias. Farm to School programs help children learn about healthy eating habits, and the school cafeterias provide food from local sources, including the school gardens that children plant and harvest. Those programs reach more than 50 schools in New Mexico. Recently FTT developed a "Toolkit" for food safety in School Gardens. FTT also runs educational programs to help local communities build their knowledge of pollinator-friendly plants and expand their capacity to keep environments (farms, yards, parks, riverbanks, etc.) pesticide free and pollinator friendly.

Historically all communities in the state of New Mexico have their imprint on the ways in which food is grown and becomes available. FTT New Mexico uses a mix of ways and means, including Native American wisdom of the sacred Earth Mother, Hispanic traditions of earth and water protection and sustainability, as well as the latest agricultural science developed by the Agricultural Extension Service, helpful farm and ranch policies promoted by the State Department of Agriculture, and

environmental science focused on building new approaches for sustainable food systems. FTT staff work where they are invited, recognizing the importance of working with traditional perspectives in rural communities and using ways to blend cultural wisdom with knowledge gained from new understanding about soil conditions, water resources, climate changes and human well-being.

As consumers gain better knowledge about healthy diets, their interest grows in grass-fed animals and animals raised on permaculture fields without the aid of antibiotics. In addition, consumers are learning more about the potential dangers of herbicides and pesticides for the healthy development of humans and animals. Organic farming and ranching made a \$53 million contribution to the New Mexican economy in 2013. There has been an explosion of farmers markets all across the state of New Mexico, more than 35 in 2014, as small producers find collaborative ways to provide fresh and nutritious foods to local consumers. Contrary to recent trends in the rest of the USA, the number of farms in New Mexico increased by 18 percent in the five years between 2007 and 2012.

In the longer run, farming depends upon the health of soils, the availability of sufficient water and fortunate climate outcomes, and the health of pollinators, which are so necessary to abundant production. Of course, the wise engagement with all of these resources is part of what makes a farmer an efficient and safe food producer and promotes awareness of pesticide-free land stewardship efforts and the continuing biodiversity necessary for sustainable development.

While New Mexico has decidedly different regional ecosystems for food production, FTT helps the various regions to establish effective linkages between good farming and good eating practices. To address the issue of water scarcity, which is acute in the state, FTT makes every effort to provide useful information from historical Hispanic and Native American irrigation methods to develop drip systems and hydroponics, approaches that will help conserve every drop of water available for healthy food production.

National, state and local policies that directly affect the goals of providing nutritious, affordable, locally grown and culturally significant food are a key to continuing the move away from

industrial agricultural production. Such policies relate to facilitating schools, hospitals and senior centers to have the resources to make local purchases of healthy foods. They are policies that will restrict the use of antibiotics in animal production, which are harmful to human health, and increase the opportunities for small farm purchases. Such policies can protect water resources and facilitate biodiversity among the foods available. Building community programs that help effective functioning of the very complex systems that make up the production, handling, distribution and consumption of food requires wise understanding of all the links. Sustainable development activists can help communities to develop approaches that identify new relationships with each other, address the imperatives of establishing life-supporting ecosystems, and simultaneously protect human well-being (Gamble and Hoff, 2012).

(Note: Pamela M. Roy, Executive Director and Nelsy Dominguez, Deputy Director/Chief Operating Officer, Farm to Table New Mexico, contributed to this article.)

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***Opinions expressed in the article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect views of the ICSW Management Committee.***

➤ ***Intergovernmental cooperation on ageing issues***

The fifth session of the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on Ageing aimed at strengthening the protection of the human rights of older persons took place at UN Headquarters in New York from 30 July to 1 August 2014. The previous four sessions of the OEWG were convened in 2011-2013. Despite useful discussions highlighting many acute problems that older persons have been facing, the results of the session were rather thin in substantive terms and disappointing to many, reflecting a diplomatic stalemate on the key issue—the feasibility of a new legal instrument to protect the rights of older persons, such as the proposed International Convention on the Rights and Dignity of Older Persons.

Many delegates, along with representatives of international organizations and NGOs, spoke at length about the vulnerabilities of older persons relating to their age; raised issues of income support and financial security; and discussed welfare and social protection schemes, family and intergenerational solidarity, health care and long-term care, nutrition and shelter. It was underscored during the discussion that the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing has not lost its relevance for policy makers and remains the point of reference on ageing-specific policies.

Quite often the arguments put forward by proponents and opponents of the Convention bore much resemblance to the positions already articulated during the previous sessions of the Open-Ended Working Group. Developing countries, with the Latin American group in the forefront, put emphasis on the similarity of problems that older persons face in developing and developed countries and the need for a new dedicated international instrument. That group of delegates argued – sometimes very eloquently and with great passion -- that in all regions of the world, no matter rich or poor, the elderly faced similar challenges, namely poverty, violence, discrimination, abuse of all kinds, from physical to financial, and eventually social exclusion. From their standpoint, many of the above-mentioned social ills could be addressed much better if an International Convention on the Rights on Older persons became a reality. Accordingly, the main purpose of the OEWG itself was seen

by those representatives not so much to continue the current discussions—even given their undeniable significance and importance—but to shift the focus to specific issues related to the elaboration of the framework of the proposed Convention, including consideration of some key elements during the meetings of the OEWG. But those suggestions remained unacceptable to several key developed countries. At the same time, some of the biggest players among the developing countries, such as China and India, were very cautious in their statements and did not call outright for a new legal instrument either.

Even when delegates disagreed with each other on the Convention issue, most of them welcomed the recent appointment by the Human Rights Council of the Independent Expert on the rights of older persons—a step proposed by Brazil and Argentina. The delegate of Brazil also reminded participants that not so long ago the negotiations on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 and now ratified by 147 countries, had faced similar opposition from several delegations, and many of the arguments presented against it a decade ago also looked similar.

Welcoming in principle the holding of the fifth session of the Open-ended Working Group and emphasizing its usefulness as an opportunity to keep discussion alive and exchange more on regional and national matters and efforts, the opponents of the proposed new legal instruments argued, in the words of the European Union representative, that “the whole spectrum of internationally recognized human rights standards and principles naturally also covers and protects older persons without discrimination”, while many issues discussed at the fifth session -- such as violence, care, and financial issues -- were also addressed by the current international legal framework. In that light, the proposed approach to the Convention controversy by the opponents was similar to the arguments put forward by that group of representatives a year ago: even though it was important to discuss the implementation and protection gaps, those existing gaps “are not of a normative nature”, and therefore, did not require a new legal instrument such as a Convention; the most important approach

was “to focus on a determined application of existing standards”.

In the same vein, the delegate of Canada expressed concerns that a new convention might duplicate the work being done by other conventions and might apply “more pressure on a monitoring system that is already overburdened”. The delegates of the pro-Convention camp voiced strong disagreement with those arguments. El Salvador speaking on behalf of the cross-regional “Group of Friends of Older Persons” established during the previous, fourth session of the OEWG, stated that “the non-binding character of the existing dedicated regime makes its fulfillment impossible and makes those instruments nothing but a declaration of principles subject to the will and judicial frameworks of each State”.

In a nutshell, the above disagreements on the feasibility of the Convention reflected not only different regional priorities and different perspectives but also a very different understanding why such a Convention might be important (or not) as a legal instrument. Trust in national judicial systems as the ultimate guarantor of the rights of older persons was also clearly a point of disagreement.

*Sergei Zelenev, Executive Director, ICSW*

For more details, please go to: <http://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/fifthsession.shtml>

➤ ***ICSW General Assembly Meeting***

The ICSW General Assembly meeting took place in Melbourne, Australia on 12 July 2014 in the wake of the Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development. The delegates to the ICSW General Assembly considered the most acute issues contained in the report on the state of the global organization submitted to the General Assembly by ICSW President Michael Cichon, paying particular attention to the issues of membership, budget structure, resource mobilization and the coordination of long-term plans with immediate priorities. The need for financial sustainability was emphasized.

The Executive Director, Sergei Zelenev, presented the Annual Report for the period January 1

to December 31, 2013, highlighting several key areas of ICSW's work, including activities on social welfare and social development; networking and policy innovations; communication with stakeholders; as well as regional level activities and partnerships. Revamping and updating of the global ICSW website along with improving work on the regional newsletters published by ICSW were seen by the delegates as important steps in increasing the profile and relevance of the organization globally and regionally.

The General Assembly expressed its strong appreciation for the current work of ICSW staff, and also expressed gratitude to the ICSW representatives who had participated in the preparation of the Joint World Conference in Melbourne, serving on the International Steering Committee and the International Programme Committee, contributing to a very successful outcome of the Conference. Professor Heung Bong Cha, the President of the ICSW- North East Asia Region, updated the meeting on the preparations for the next global conference to be convened on 27-30 June 2015 in Seoul, the Republic of Korea.

The General Assembly concluded its work with election of Mrs. Mirtha Sosa Crevoisier (Uruguay) as a vice president of the ICSW.

➤ ***Useful resources and links***

The Overseas Development Institute, UK, recently published an independent study on the political economy of four East African countries: Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda. The focus of the report called *East African prospects* and authored by David Booth, Brian Cooksey, Frederick Goloba-Mutebi and Karuti Kanyinga is on modalities of support to the development of productive sectors in the above mentioned countries of the East African Community, including linkages between political and economic power, issues in the governance of economic growth, and prospects and risks in the new and medium-term future.

For more details, please go to: <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8945.pdf>

The Agewell Foundation, an India-based think tank and advocacy center, recently released a study on the issue of the rights of older persons considered in the context of Indian realities (*Human rights of older people in India: A Reality Check*, July 2014). The conclusions of the authors are sobering: despite various laws, policies and schemes for the welfare and empowerment of older persons, violations of the human rights of the elderly are on the rise. "Though the majority of older persons are financially independent in old age, they live a life full of elder abuse, age discrimination and ageism" (p.41). The authors stress that, due to the fact that "old age" is being treated "like a curse", the voice of the elderly often remained unheard and their visibility in the public life was low.

For more details:

<http://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/documents/fifth/AgewellFoundationHumanRightsofOlderPeopleinIndia.pdf>

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