

UK Food Group speech - 24 September 2010

Caroline Lucas MP

Good morning to you all. I'd like to start by thanking the conference organisers and the UK Food Group for inviting me to speak to you today. It's a privilege to be offered a chance to contribute to these discussions about the vital subject of shaping the future of our food system.

Today will be a chance to share your success stories. To talk about how it is possible to change our food system for the better - making it greener, fairer and more resilient in the face of pressures from population growth, climate change, and predatory commercial interests.

We begin these vital discussions at a time when nearly a billion people worldwide still do not have enough to eat.

Some progress has been made in the last ten years towards Millennium Development Goal Number One: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

But a lot of that progress was wiped out in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. That crisis led to steep and shocking rises in the price of basic foodstuffs that are relied upon by entire populations - corn, rice and wheat.

And the instability of food prices led in its turn to political instability, rioting, and for the poorest, most vulnerable people, it led to the misery and hardship of hunger.

We have had more of the same this summer, with drought in Russia and extreme weather in other cereal-producing regions pushing up the price of wheat and other staples. A 30 percent rise in the price of bread in Mozambique provoked rioting earlier this month that left nearly a dozen dead.

The situation is serious enough for the UN to convene an emergency meeting of its Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome today, to explore ways of avoiding the kind of market volatility that threatens the food security - in fact, let us be absolutely clear, that threatens the lives of many millions of people around the world.

And I think, as we enter into these discussions, that we must be absolutely clear about the real causes of food insecurity and the real causes of hunger.

As the FAO itself states, 'hunger has increased not as a result of poor harvests but because of high food prices, low incomes and increasing unemployment'.

The bitter irony, as nearly a billion go hungry, and as we gather to discuss new ways to boost food production, is that there is already more than enough food to go around. Despite bad harvests in Russia, the global cereal crop this year was the third highest on record.

There is plenty of food. But the current food system is not about feeding people.

It's about feeding livestock: around half of the annual US maize crop is used for animal feed. We know that in industrialised systems animals are often kept in appalling conditions and that livestock emissions are a major contributor to climate change.

It's about feeding cars: in 2009, 25 percent of the US maize crop was processed into ethanol for automotive fuel. That would have been enough to feed 330 million people for a year.

Food for people comes at the bottom of the list. Because that's not where the real money is. Food has become a commodity to be traded. And the food system that has evolved to serve the demands of the free market is ruthlessly focussed in the way it operates. It has no regard for people. It has no regard for the environment. It has no regard for the security and stability of communities and of nations. The only thing that matters under the current system is profit. Short-term profit.

It is clear, ladies and gentlemen, that the current system cannot be allowed to continue.

We must come together, on behalf of nearly a billion hungry people, and billions more who struggle to afford to feed themselves when faced with competition from the rich world's cows, and the rich world's cars. We must come together to demand a new approach to how the world's food is produced and distributed. An approach that is principally and primarily about food for people.

A New Approach

As I said earlier, when we talk about food security, good news can be a rare thing. But there is some grounds for optimism. There is growing recognition of the many shortcomings of the industrialized, globalized model of food production.

And a growing recognition that a new approach to how we solve the problem of a billion hungry people can offer solutions to a host of other pressing problems as well: to rural poverty, to the empowerment of women, and to climate change.

First of all though, we must explode the biggest and most enduring myth about industrial agriculture: that it is the only way.

Big Agribusiness would have you believe that going large-scale, going industrial, going GM, is the only way to feed the world. 'Inefficient' agroecological methods, they say, simply can't produce enough to feed everybody, let alone meet the projected 70% increase in demand for food by 2050.

We have the evidence at our disposal to show governments and policy makers that this simply isn't true. Research is already showing that small-scale methods, given the right support, can increase productivity to meet increasing demand.

Small-scale, localized agriculture *can* produce enough to feed us all. And unlike industrial agriculture, it can do more than that.

Real food security is about more than boosting overall production. That is the one thing that industrial agriculture is good at: large yields. But successful agriculture is about so much more than large yields.

The European Commission's recent Communication on assisting developing countries in addressing food security challenges is an encouraging sign that Europe is beginning to recognise how crucial the small-scale approach is to food security in the most vulnerable nations.

Reducing Poverty

Its Communication acknowledges that, and I quote:

'investments in the smallholder sector yield the best returns in terms of poverty reduction and growth'.

Small-scale agriculture *can* provide food security. And it can provide job security. Small-scale is superior in this regard to large-scale, precisely because it is labour-intensive. It offers consistent employment to many millions of people. Whereas industrial agriculture measures its success by how few jobs it creates.

Finally, the arguments we've been making for years, about the economic and employment benefits of small-scale, local food production, are finding traction in official circles.

We in the Green Party have long maintained that the free-marketeer's simple formula of 'deregulation and economic growth equals prosperity for all' is a myth.

Now we have the FAO saying that it is 'clear that economic growth, while essential, will not be sufficient to eliminate hunger within an acceptable period of time'.

Finally, some acknowledgement that a rising tide does not lift all boats: that supporting small-scale agriculture, and the local wealth, local jobs and broader social cohesion it fosters, will do far more

to address poverty than simply throwing open the doors to the multinationals, and creating artificial economies, built on precarious and unsustainable export markets.

We must make this point, and keep making it - real food security is about reducing poverty.

The Environment

And the case for industrial agriculture breaks down even more rapidly when we consider its environmental impact, particularly with regard to the looming threat of peak oil. In other words, the point at which half of the total oil known to exist has been consumed, and beyond which extraction goes into irreversible decline.

And while some analysts have started to look at the impacts of peak oil on our transport systems, and on how we heat our homes, very little work has so far focussed on the implications for our food systems.

Unfortunately, Western industrialised farming has evolved into a system for “turning oil into food”, reliant as it is, on energy-intensive manufacture of synthetic fertilizers, heavy use of oil-based plastics, and centralised, oil-dependent, just-in-time distribution systems.

- This has been exacerbated by the major shift to highly processed and packaged food;
- The globalisation of the food industry, with a huge increase in imports and exports
- Major changes in delivery patterns, with most goods now routed through supermarket regional distribution centres.

Not only that, but much of our food system is staggeringly inefficient in terms of its energy use. Overall, if you include energy costs for farm machinery, transportation, processing and feedstocks for agricultural chemicals - pesticides and fertilizers - the modern food system typically consumes roughly 10 calories of fossil fuel energy for every 1 calorie of food energy it produces.

Under the current industrial system of food production our food security is inextricably linked to oil security - and that is deteriorating fast.

What a contrast with the small-scale, localized approach to food production.

The environmental benefits of small-scale production are beginning to be understood in official circles, albeit with agonising slowness. To quote from the UN's International Assessment of

Agricultural Science and Technology for Development, which I'm sure will inform a large part of today's discussions:

An increase and strengthening of agricultural knowledge, science and technology towards agroecological sciences will contribute to addressing environmental issues while maintaining and increasing productivity.

Small-scale producers possess a huge amount of collective knowledge, refined and developed over generations, about how to get the best out of the land in ways that are ecologically sustainable. Ways that involve minimum inputs, that use water efficiently, that maximise soil fertility without the use of artificial fertilisers, and that recognise the importance of biodiversity for a healthy and productive ecosystem.

Oil-hungry industrial agriculture generates enormous carbon emissions. Small-scale farmers, by contrast, employ methods which reduce the production of greenhouse gases. Soils which are sensitively managed and kept fertile through, for example, intercropping and using organic mulches, have huge potential to act as carbon sinks. And methods which maintain soil quality and avoid overgrazing, so that land stays productive for more than a few seasons, helps to reduce deforestation and habitat loss.

Industrial agriculture does none of these things. It is not designed to. It doesn't mitigate climate change: it makes it worse.

So again, we must make this point, and keep making it - real food security is about tackling climate change.

Women

And then, as if these added benefits were not enough, there is the role played in small-scale agriculture by women. As the Food Group's briefing points out, women farmers grow 80 percent of Africa's food. Real support for small-scale agriculture will, by definition, mean support for women: it will raise their incomes, increase their economic participation, and will go a long way towards achieving Millennium Development Goals 3, 4 and 5: empowerment of women, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health.

Industrial agriculture doesn't even begin to concern itself with such issues. It treats women in the developing world the same way it treats people and cultures and ways of life everywhere that are not compatible with the pursuit of profit: as an irrelevance.

So yet again, we must make this point, and keep making it - real food security is about empowering women.

A Way of Life

Small-scale agriculture allows us to make progress towards all these goals because it's not just a method of production. It's a relationship to the land and to the ecosystems it supports. It is the basis of whole communities; the bedrock of entire societies. It's a way of life. It is life.

So we need to continue building and maintaining the weight of evidence that small-scale food production, using agroecological methods, that sustains jobs, empowers women, creates local wealth and strengthens the fabric of rural communities is an effective and real solution to hunger, and to many other problems that we face in the world today.

Specific Measures

In terms of specific measures that will help to further the transformation of our food systems, these are some of the things I would like to see.

First, I would like to see the recommendations of the IAASTD used as a guide to the formulation of food policy at national and European level. It has been approved by 58 governments, including the UK government, but in terms of the impact it has had on policy so far, it has been effectively ignored. Lobbying efforts must be directed towards raising awareness of its findings and making sure they have a bearing on future policymaking;

Second, I would like to see a major emphasis on expanding the sort of infrastructure projects that make a huge difference to the viability of small-scale agriculture, namely microcredit and micro-insurance schemes. The availability of small amounts of affordable finance and insurance provides a measure of security that can make the difference between a stable living and living hand to mouth. There have been numerous successful schemes in Africa and South Asia and I would like to see those successes expanded and replicated;

In addition to this, I would like to see a major expansion of information and communications technology in the developing world, particularly in rural areas. I am patron of a Brighton-based charity that has provided computer facilities to small villages in Kenya. This has brought huge benefits in terms of access to information and educational resources, so that people in remote areas can share, as I hope you will today, their success stories and draw support and solidarity from the experiences of other rural communities. For the many geographically dispersed individuals that work on the 85% of farms that are under 2 hectares in size, access to ICT is a key way to link up, to pool their collective power, and to build themselves into a movement with the size and strength to stand up to the global clout of Big Agribusiness;

We also need to see higher animal welfare standards and less emphasis on meat based diets.

And finally, I would like to see the establishment of a different and separate set of trade rules for food commodities to that which governs trade in non-food commodities. I have recently written to the Chancellor George Osborne to ask him what the government intends to do to protect poor import-dependent countries from the kind of speculation in food derivatives that pushes up prices and allows hedge funds and investment banks to profit from hunger. Trading in food must not be treated as simply another form of business as usual: for many people it is a matter of life and death. We must insist on tighter regulation of trade in food derivatives, and indeed, as the UK Food Group suggests, the complete removal of agriculture from the remit of the World Trade Organisation.

I hope that you will share your success stories: but not just today, and not just with each other. I want policymakers to hear those stories. I want everyone with even the smallest degree of responsibility for our food system, and for the assistance that the developed world gives to those in the developing world, to understand and to accept that there is a real alternative to business as usual.

That it's a way to deliver food security, and ultimately food sovereignty, to the world's most vulnerable people, who have been let down so badly by the profit-driven industrial food system that has prevailed for decades.

And it will require unwavering commitment from all of us. Because those same vested interests in Big Agribusiness – the companies that did so well out of the proprietary technologies of the so-called 'Green Revolution', and that are now trying to stamp their trademarks all over the global food chain yet again, with the aggressive promotion of GMOs – they will fight hard to protect their precious market share. Their lobbyists are hard at work, trying to persuade those in power that agroecology is bunkum, that the likes of us are Luddites, dreamers, sentimentalists who want to keep poor people poor. They will argue til they are blue in the face that the only way to save humanity from starvation is genetically-modified crops.

Big agriculture, and the biotech industry, with their pitiless commercial imperatives, do more damage to food security than any drought, or blight, or fungus. They are more tenacious than any weed. We must counter their hollow, self-seeking arguments as persistently and patiently as the farmers among you deal with the other pests that threaten your livelihoods.

I know that we will win the argument. We will free our food system from the harmful parasites that plague it. We will do it with sound agroecological science, unfaltering political will, with pride, with passion, and with love of the land and the living it affords us. They are stronger than any pesticide.