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2010

The Sustainable Food Movement: The Local, Slow and Justice Food Solutions to the Global Food Crisis

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/marcotavanti/21/>

**The Sustainable Food Movement:
The Local, Slow and Justice Food Solutions
to the Global Food Crisis**

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ISTR's 9th International Conference
July 7-10, 2010, Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey

Food is more than a commodity. The economic aspect of food needs to be integrated and balanced with the environmental and societal aspects of a sustainable food system. The author argues that a new movement for sustainable food is emerging as exemplified in the growing local (locavore), slow food and food justice movements. Drawing on the concepts of sustainability and the observations of growing food trends, the paper offers a new analysis of social movements between the global and the local. The environmental, social and economic frameworks of sustainability give local, “slow” and sovereignty solutions to the current global food crisis.

Introduction

We need food to live. Food cannot be considered simply as a commodity. Food is a human right! Food is central to our daily existence. It is a central feature of societies and world cultures but also of policies and global-local economies. Indeed the world food system has become a global battle for dominating minds, mouths, and markets (Lang and Heasman 2004). We live in a contradictory global reality where we currently have more than 1.2 billion undernourished people worldwide while our planet produced enough food to feed humanity nearly twice over (FAO 2009). By focusing exclusively on the production of food, we miss one of the most critical root causes of food insecurity: the over-commoditization of our global food supply. We need to

recover the true significance of food in a balanced equation between food security, livelihoods, health and the environment.

“Food *is* different. It is not just any merchandise or commodity. Food means farming, and farming means rural livelihoods, traditions and cultures, and its means preserving, or destroying, rural landscapes. Farming means rural society, agrarian histories; in many cases, rural areas are the repositories of the cultural legacies of nations and peoples. Food can give us pleasure, it can taste good or bad, it can be good for us or bad for us” (Rossett 2006, 9).

Food and agriculture are at the foundation of society. Food nourishes the body, but also provides for the pleasures of quality and taste. The sharing of a meal connects us with family and community. Agriculture is a way of life for millions in the developing world. The practice of farming is not only a means of livelihood, but a contribution to the preservation and protection of the world’s biodiversity and local communities. Unfortunately, these very basic and important values have begun to disappear in the process of globalization that has transformed food into a commodity to be processed, bought, and sold.

Food politics has become a central theme even at the White House where First Lady Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move* campaign goal is to “give parents the support they need, provide healthier food in schools, help our kids to be more physically active, and make healthy, affordable food available in every part of our country” (The White House 2010). Mrs. Obama is a strong supporter of a movement toward more local, sustainable and healthy food practices in families, schools and industries (Pollan 2010). Various food movements seek to transform the industrial food production because its social/environmental/public health/animal welfare/gastronomic costs are too high. In a word, food and agriculture have become unsustainable and nowhere has this fact been more apparent than in the emergence of the global food crisis in 2008.

The Global Food Crisis

In a recent report the World Bank observes that while the global economy is showing tentative signs of recovery, the food crisis is not over in poor countries. Although prices have declined from their peaks in 2008, higher food grain prices and devastating climate change effects have been a deadly combination for poor people in Low-Income Countries in rural and urban areas. Beside the humanitarian commitment of the G20 and the worldwide efforts in raising productivity and incomes of the world's poor farmers the situation demands a review on global food policies in favor of more sustainable food policies and practices.

The rapidly growing sustainable food movement, through various multi-stakeholder initiatives and organization offer viable solutions to the international dependent, often unfair and unsustainable global food market system.

“The *root cause* of the crisis is a global food system that is highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks” (Holt-Giménez 2008, 4). A reflection of the global food crisis in 2008, is to reflect on changes to the global food system that have been decades in the making. The food crisis that reverberated throughout the world in 2008 highlighted the problems created by a global food system, in particular for the poor and hungry of the developing world. As a result of the underlying issues leading to the current crisis, for the first time since 1970, more than one billion people are hungry and undernourished, with that number expected to expand by nearly 9 percent in 2009 (FAO, 2009).

The current crisis is unlike any other before it, affecting much larger parts of the world in a system where the increasing integration of developing countries into the global economy has left them more vulnerable than ever before to shocks in the system. Since the middle of the 20th

century, the world's food system has quickly been transformed from a system of local production into a global market. Today many countries produce large quantities of only a few crops each, mainly for export, and now depend on imports for much of their own food supply (Clemmitt 2008). This trend has its roots in the structural adjustment programs of the 1970s, when many developing countries agreed to trade liberalization as part of debt restructuring. As a result, developing countries agreed to open their agricultural sectors to the world with a whole raft of measures including reductions in domestic subsidies for staple crops in favor of export crops as well as a reduction in import tariffs and quotas. This pressure for developing countries to open their markets only continued through the 1990s with the development of trade agreements aimed at expanding the global trade of food (Halweil 2004; Rossett 2006).

While the process of trade liberalization and globalization of the food system has made food imports cheap, they are associated with significant costs. In the face of foreign competition, there has been little incentive for developing countries to improve their own agricultural systems. In addition, the food crises that occurred during this period of time have largely been addressed via food aid, further dampening agricultural developments and long-term solutions in these countries (Clapp 2009; Conceição & Mendoza 2009). Today, many developing nations are now net-food importers and rely on agricultural imports to feed their citizens.

Unfortunately, the developing world's reliance on food imports has only led to an even greater degree of vulnerability in the current crisis, and these problems inherent in the global food system were only exacerbated by a number of short-term factors:

- Historically low global supply of grain stocks coupled with high demand – Global grain stocks have been on a steep decline since the year 2000 from over 110 days worth of grain supply to less than 60 days in 2004. This decline has been due in part to global

demand continuing to outpace supply, as well the decision by a number of countries to reduce stocks of excess grain as a result of historically low prices (Evans 2009).

- Rising demand for grain-based biofuels – A rising demand for grain-based biofuels in the years leading up to the crisis saw a large portion of maize being production diverted from the food supply for the production of ethanol, with the price of food rising by much as 30% as a result of this (Clapp 2009).
- Rising price of oil – The practice of agriculture worldwide is an oil-intensive activity. Oil prices affect both the price of fertilizers and other chemicals used in crop production as well as the cost of transporting food globally. For wheat and corn, the price of fertilizers alone account for between 15-20% of total costs, while the price of oil has added as much as 10.2% to the export prices of these commodities (Headey & Fan 2008).
- The concurrent global economic crisis – Integration of world's financial markets has also exposed the developing world to the devastating effects of the global economic crisis. Depreciation of the U.S. dollar in the years leading up the financial crisis has been linked to a 20% increase in food prices around the world as well as financial speculation in the agriculture sector. (Headey & Fan 2008).

Putting significant pressure on already problematic global food system in which over 90% of the world's poor and hungry are simply too poor to buy enough food, these factors highlight the global shift from local food production and food self-sufficiency into a system of food import dependency and food insecurity in the developing world (Holt-Giménez 2009). And while food prices have since come down from their highest points in 2008, the problems created by the global food system will only persist as these short-term factors are likely to become lasting issues if drastic changes are not made.

Two issues in particular also have the potential to put an even greater strain on the global food system or worse, create more frequent and persistent food crises in the future: population growth and climate change. The world population is expected to grow to 9.2 billion by 2050, with much of this growth taking place in the developing world. In the coming decades, this growth in population is estimated to increase worldwide food demand 50% by 2030. At the

same time, the lack of a coordinated effort by the world's leaders to combat climate change could mean a significant rise in global temperatures. Scientists have predicted that higher temperatures will have the greatest impact on the Global South. A warming climate in the Global South will be seriously detrimental to agricultural production and could lead to reduced grain yields, unpredictable weather patterns, and increased water scarcity (Evans, 2009).

The food crisis has made abundantly clear that the costs associated with a global food system are too great to ignore and will require drastic changes if we are to avoid future crises while dealing with the looming issues of population growth and climate change. The poor and hungry of the world, the majority living in developing countries, will continue to be the ones disproportionately impacted by the consequences of the global food system if drastic changes are not made to the way in which the global food system currently operates. Improving the global food system for the poor and hungry requires a system which is significantly more just and equitable.

Ultimately, these changes must be rooted in sustainability in order to transform the global food system into one that is altogether just, equitable, and environmentally sound.

The Sustainable Food Paradigm

Sustainability is not just another trend and its concepts are increasingly influencing the ways we live into our one and only world. The concepts and pillars of sustainability reflect the current dynamics of the food movements. The environmental frame of sustainability reflect concerns visible in the local food (locavore) movement; the social frame reflects the concerns of the slow food (relational) movement while the economic frame of sustainability is conducive to

the food justice (sovereignty) movement. The following illustrations synthetically integrate the sustainability frameworks with the trends on food movements.

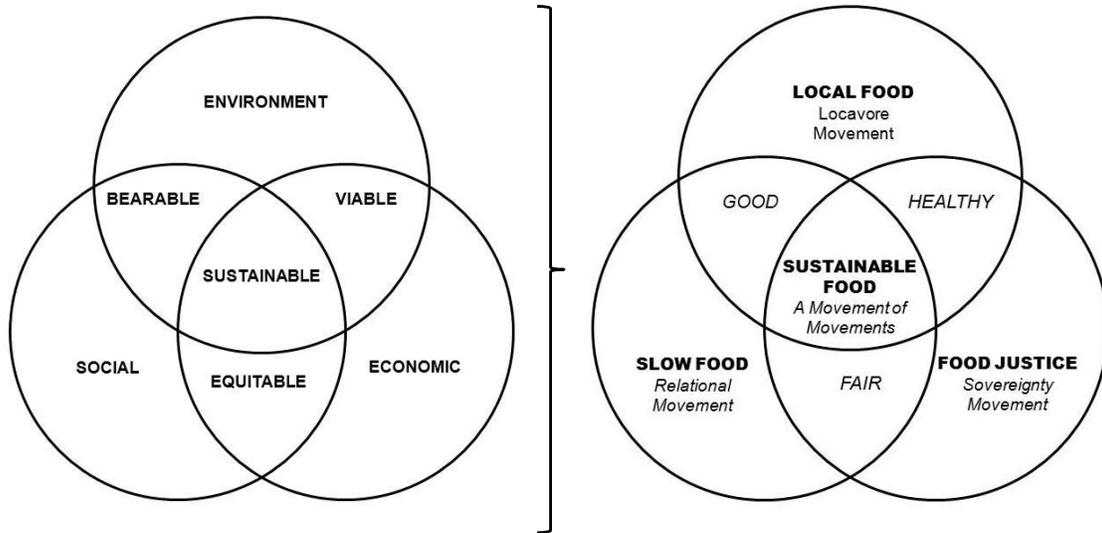


Fig 1: The Sustainability Frameworks and in the Sustainable Food Movement

Sustainability is the necessary condition for a global food system that will be resilient in the face of future challenges. Initially conceived of as way in which to articulate the possibility of economic growth without environmental damage, the concept has since developed in scope and meaning (Adams 2006), particularly with the introduction of the notion of sustainable development. First introduced in the report *Our Common Future*, authored by the United Nation’s Brundtland Commission in 1987, sustainable development is defined as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,’ a recognition of the important linkages between environmental degradation and its contribution to socio-economic problems (Hopwood, Mellor & O’Brien 2005).

These early definitions have since evolved to encompass the three key dimensions that are at the core of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. While the three dimensions have sometimes been described as ‘pillars,’ such a definition fails to acknowledge the interdependence of these three dimensions. Through the integration of three dimensions, sustainable development takes a systemic and holistic approach to the search for viable solutions to the most pressing problems facing global society today.

Sustainable development provides the most compelling and necessary solution for confronting the problems inherent in the global food system. As a multi-faceted, multi-sector issue that impacts every corner of the globe, food and agriculture have become the catalyst in a global movement that is working to address the negative impacts of the global food system on economic, social, and environmental levels – a sustainable food movement.

In his book *Blessed Unrest*, environmentalist Paul Hawken describes the growth in the number of organizations and individuals who are part of a massive, yet unnamed movement toward social and environmental sustainability occurring on a global scale. Calling it the largest movement in the history of the world, he estimates the organizations that comprise this movement number nearly two million (Hawken 2007).

Hawken notes the hallmark of this movement lies in its unconventionality,

“This movement, however, doesn’t fit the standard model. It is dispersed, inchoate, and fiercely independent. It has no manifesto or doctrine, no overriding authority to check with. It is taking shape in schoolrooms, farms, jungles, villages, companies, deserts, fisheries, slums... One of its distinctive features is that it is tentatively emerging as a global humanitarian movement arising from the bottom up” (Hawken 2007, 3).

While lacking a single name to unify and define their work, the organizations and individuals that are central to this global movement have in common their recognition of the inherently

flawed nature of the global food system and the need for change and are united in their understanding that because food is different, the way the current global food system operates cannot stand.

Their work is a small part of the collection of social movements around the world, characterized by their use of group action seeks to “transform the values and institutions of society” (Castells 1997, 3). Modern developments in the theory of social movement, what some scholars have termed new social movements (NSMs), further shed light on the work of these individuals and organizations. Sociologist Nelson A. Pichardo (1997) describes a number of key concepts that unify and define the organizations and individuals that are part of new social movements:

- NSMs advocate for direct democracy and cooperative styles of social organization, calling into question the structures of representative democracies that limit citizen input and participation in governance
- NSMs organize themselves in a fluid non-rigid style, tending toward rotating leadership, voting communally on issues, and the existence of impermanent ad hoc organizations
- NSMs call for and create structures that are more responsive to the needs of the individual and are open, decentralized, and nonhierarchical
- Participants in NSMs are marked by the common concern for social issues, defined by common values rather than a common structural location

Together the organizations and individuals that are leading the movement to transform the global food system are rooted in the value of sustainability, emphasizing democratic and cooperative action outside of mainstream political and social structures, and in a more local and regional context. The organizations and individuals that are a part of the sustainable food movement have been able to fuse together successfully the dimensions of environmental, social, and economic sustainability in way that is both compelling and necessary for the future of a global food system that works for the benefit of all of humanity.

In the context of the global food crisis, the organizations and individuals that form this movement, the organizations that follow are important examples of the various groups that form this global movement. While differing in their approaches and ultimate goals, each organization is working in its own way to restore economic, social, and environmental sustainability to all aspects of the global food system. The following organizations are exemplary in their work to reform the global food system for the benefit of all across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. They are the driving force behind what is beginning to emerge as a global sustainable food movement, a movement that seeks change along the entire food chain from farm to fork.

1. The Slow Food Movement

Slow Food is a rapidly growing movement with over 100,000 members in 132 countries. It was founded in 1989 to “counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s declining interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world.” Slow Food International, specifically through the work of its Foundation for Biodiversity has been on the forefront around the world with projects to defend local food traditions, protect local biodiversity and promote small-scale quality products, with an increasing focus on investments in countries of the Global South.

The Slow Food movement is rooted in the social dimension of sustainability and its concern for the destruction of the pleasures of taste and quality by the global food system. The foundation of the Slow Food movement lies in the three principles of “Good, Clean, and Fair food.” With a global network of 100,000 members in over 1,000 local chapters, the Slow Food movement works to defend biodiversity in the food supply, spread “taste education,” and to bring

producers and co-producers of excellent food together (Slow Food 2010). In doing so, Slow Food seeks to create a more sustainable and equitable food system.

The Slow Food movement recognizes the importance of food in defining human identity: “Food is the product of a region and of what has happened to it, of the people who live there, of its history, and of the relations it has established with other regions. One can talk about any place in the world simply by talking about the food that is produced and consumed there” (Petrini 2007, 37).

The enjoyment of food, the pleasure of taste, the sense of community has been lost as a result of the global food system with its preference for food lacking in taste, quality, and respect for people and environment. By emphasizing the ‘slowness’ of food in every aspect, the Slow Food movement encourages a reversal of many of the negative aspects of the global food system by helping people to be more aware of food and the people in processes behind it. Slowness means a recognition of and preference for good, clean and fair food within a fair and sustainable food distribution system.

The forming of a global distribution system, dominated by a few operators who draw strength from their financial structure and supranational operations (although there are plenty of smaller operators, too), has filled the production chain with innumerable intermediaries, thus helping to increase even further the distance between producer and consumer. Our proposed counterbalance to this distance is, off course, the network of gastronomes and the figure of co-producer. But the problems posted by this long chain of intermediaries go beyond that of the distance (physical or cultural) between the ends of the chain. Rather, the graver concern lies in matters of economics, ecology and social justice (Petrini 2007, 227).

The last 30 years of “successful” fast food nation economies had a significant cost to the environment, public health, the public purse, even to the culture (Weber 2009). Slow Food presents a different food metaphor, which likens the enjoyment of life and food to an art. It encourages the pursuit of pleasure in moderation refuses the metaphor of “food as fuel.” The slow food approach promotes a return to traditional values, challenging the “pace of economic,

technological and social change and...globalization” (Jones 2003). Despite the magnitude of this task, the Slow Food movement has gained steady momentum over 20 years due to the strength of its self-reinforcing and self-sustaining community network.

2. The Local food (*locavore*) Movement

The “locavore” or local food movement is centered within the environmental dimension of sustainability. While the term “locavore” was first used in 2005 by a group of women living in the San Francisco Bay Area of California to describe their efforts to eat food grown and harvested within a 100 mile radius of this area, the locavore or local food movement is rooted in its concern for the environment and the ways in which it has been negatively impacted by the global food system.

For thousands of years global food production, distribution, and consumption occurred largely within the local and regional contexts and without the intensive use of chemical inputs. However, this system was rapidly transformed in the latter half of the twentieth century by major technological advances in agriculture and the globalization of trade.

These changes have led to a situation in which the modern system of food production, distribution, and consumption is now dominated by large-scale, highly mechanized, and chemical intensive methods of production that are increasingly geared toward foreign markets (Nordberg-Hodge, Merrifield & Gorelick 2002), and generally at the expense of global biodiversity.

The local food movement has been a response to these rapid, and largely negative, changes to food and agriculture. Responding to the social and environmental consequences these methods

create, the local food movement asks us to consider a more locally-based and sustainable system of food production and consumption that can serve as the antidote to these problems.

Specifically, the local food movement provides a number of important benefits for both producers and consumers:

- Local food systems reduce the distance that food travels before reaching the consumer, using less energy for transportation and producing less pollution and greenhouse gases
- Local food production encourages the use of farming methods that are ecologically and culturally appropriate to the local environment, preserving the diversity of crops and local wildlife
- Local food systems benefit the local economy by allowing farmers to capture a greater percentage of the money spent on food and keep it circulating through the local economy; a dollar spent in the local community can generate nearly twice as much in the local community (Nordberg-Hodge, Merrifield & Gorelick 2002; Halweil 2004)

The many farmers markets, organic production and consumptions that focus on increasing local community food systems are part of a larger sustainability movement which recognize local development as a solution to the many global dysfunctions and discontents. They believe that focusing on building locally based sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption can implement local economies while respecting the environment and create vital communities. They encourage consumers to buy from farmers' markets or even to produce their own food, with some arguing that fresh, local products are more nutritious and taste better. As locally grown food have a significant less carbon footprint impact, the promotion of these alternative food economies have been recognized as a viable sustainable alternative to the current global food market economy. Although generally supporting of fair trade, the locavore movement goes beyond the economic justice values and proposes a locally-based global economy.

There is a close connection between the slow food movement and the locavore movement. Carlo Petrini, the charismatic founder and spokesperson of Slow Food expresses this clearly in his new book *Terra Madre: Forging a New Global Network of Sustainable Food Communities*.

If food was no longer obliged to make intercontinental journeys, but stayed part of a system in which it can be consumed over short distances, we would save a lot of energy and carbon dioxide emissions. And just think of what we would save in ecological terms without long-distance transportation, refrigeration, packaging - which ends up in the garbage dump anyway - and storage, which steals time, space, and vast portion of nature and beauty. In a local economy, energy and resources are optimized and waste is avoided (Petrini 2009, xvii).

Like for the Slow Food Movement's local presidios, the local networks of organic-conscious and health-concerned community members are the vital agents behind the locavore movement. However, being locally driven does not mean to be "locally" isolated. In the United States, nonprofit organizations like the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) connects hundreds of public interest food related organizations while campaigning for health, justice, and sustainability. Through online information sharing, they foster actions and increase awareness on issues that span from food safety to industrial agriculture, genetic engineering, children's health, corporate accountability, Fair Trade, environmental sustainability and other key topics. They do so by connecting local consumers and producers to the nation's larger networks of estimated 50 million organic and socially responsible consumers.

3. The Food Justice Movement

The Institute for Food and Development Policy – Food First best exemplify the global concerns for food justice, hunger and malnutrition. Through research, education, training and advocacy Food First focuses its works on promoting food sovereignty, building local agri-foods systems

and democratizing development. As a nonprofit think tank with the mission of influencing food related policies and practices worldwide, Food First analyze the root causes of global hunger, poverty, and ecological degradation and promote anti-hunger initiatives. Through their research and advocacy activities, Food First seeks to develop solutions in partnership with movements working for social change on a global scale. What is exemplary about their work is that they reflect the modern evolution of concerned global citizens who do not fight hunger simply with food donations but who attempt to empower local agricultural economies while seeking structural changes in the world's food system.

Focusing on the economic dimension of sustainability, Food First has been a champion and outspoken advocate for economic and trade reform, recognizing the strong ties of a global food system to the problems of poverty and hunger around the world. Food First has sought to document and fight for a shift in the global food system that values the place of smallholder farmers and their ecologically sound farming practices. One such organization is La Via Campesina and its emphasis on food sovereignty.

While more than 75% of the world's poorest people live in rural areas and still depend on agriculture for the livelihoods, the global food system has only contributed to the difficulties that these populations face in providing for their families and their communities. As a result of land and trade policies in countries across the Global South, many of these smallholder farmers live on marginal lands where the abilities produce sufficiently are threatened by environmentally difficult conditions and a lack of productive resources (land, water, and agricultural outputs). Even when these smallholders are able to produce a surplus of food that can be sold, they are often faced with an inability to bring their products to market or to obtain a fair price (FIAN).

Recognizing the marginalization that many smallholder farmers face as a result of the global food system, the international peasant movement known as La Via Campesina was born. Through the framework of food sovereignty, La Via Campesina has articulated the core of this movement as,

“the right of peoples, countries, and state unions to define their agricultural and food policy without the “dumping” of agricultural commodities into foreign countries. Food sovereignty organizes food production and consumption according to the needs of local communities, giving priority to production for local consumption. Food sovereignty includes the right to protect and regulate the national agricultural and livestock production and to shield the domestic market from the dumping of agricultural surpluses and low-price imports from other countries. Landless people, peasants, and small farmers must get access to land, water, and seed as well as productive resources and adequate public services. Food sovereignty and sustainability are a higher priority than trade policies” (La Via Campesina 2010).

The concept of food sovereignty proposes not just guaranteed access to food, but democratic control over the entire food system – from production and processing, to distribution, marketing and consumption (Holt-Giménez 2009). The food sovereignty movement is one that favors a bottom-up approach in order to create a more sustainable, democratic, equitable and just food system. It acknowledges that smallholder farmers in the developing world are the stewards of the earth, the key holders to thousands of years of sustainable farming knowledge that can be incredibly productive without the use of chemicals and fertilizers and protects health of the land as well as biodiversity (Windfuhr and Jonsen 2010).

Conclusion

By bringing these organizations and individuals together in a more cohesive and integrated way, we can have a truly global sustainable food movement that will create positive change for all of humanity.

The sustainable food movements highlighted in this paper are working to democratize and bring equity to the food system so that communities the world over will have better access to food as well as the means to produce it. At the same time, these organizations have a strong focus on environmental sustainability and the preservation of global biodiversity which seek to minimize food and agriculture's contribution to climate change and environmental degradation.

Each of these movements shows how the unified sustainable food movement works across each of the three dimensions of sustainability for change. While each of these movements is largely centered within a single dimension, there are elements of each movement that also reach within the other dimensions making these food movements truly sustainable. In spite the diverse focus on values, interests and competencies that individuals and organizations of these various food movements have, they also share and support a common set of values. In general they would find in agreement in supporting causes and initiatives promoting food quality, healthier lifestyle, organic production, fair trade, food access, food sovereignty and food labeling, just to mention a few. They would definitely seek global policies that prevent world hunger and promote sustainable agricultural and food systems.

In the face of the current global food crisis, the sustainable food movement represents a viable and necessary alternative to revise our assumptions, policies and practices as producers, distributors and consumers of a global food chain to which our economies, health and quality of life depend on. The organizations, initiatives and movements in relation to sustainable food compels us to recognize the importance and urgency of alternative practices that help promote the moral, economic, social and environmental values behind the food we eat.

While these organizations and individuals are contributing in their own ways to the creation of a sustainable global food system, a sustainable food movement will require that their actions become more integrated for lasting change. Just as sustainability must be viewed in an integrated and holistic way, changes in the global food system must come from an integrated and holistic network of organizations and individuals. The sustainable food movement is definitely destined to expand and become more relevant in our local and global lives, environments, policies, economies and societies.

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