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Food systems, agriculture, society
How to nourish society



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Editor's note

Modern food and nutrition policy follows a medical model, treating people as individuals or, at population level, as collections of unconnected individuals. George Kent, professor of political science at the University of Hawai'i, in common with many other writers and activists, and following thought and practice throughout history, does not agree. He sees people as members of families, communities and society, shaped by inherited and learned culture and custom. He therefore sees nutrition from nutrients as just one part of nourishment. His first commentary in the previous issue of *WN*, in this *WN Balance* series on how to live wisely and well, is about how to end world hunger. This commentary is about nourishing society. Focusing on food, he shows both how communities and thus the collections of communities that constitute societies can be nourished, and how communities and whole societies that nourish their people increase autonomy, enterprise, and well-being.

Summary



A local co-operative of friends and neighbours in Mumbai, India, (above) come together as gardeners to grow food to share and sell, to green their community, and to help to ensure local nutrition security

Elinor Ostrom (1933-2012) is the one woman to win a Nobel Economics prize. In *her valedictory statement* made at the United Nations 2012 Rio conference on the future of the world in the context of climate disruption, she said (1):

> We cannot rely on global policies to solve the problem of managing our common resources: the oceans, atmosphere, forests, waterways, and rich diversity of life that combine to create the right conditions for life, including seven billion humans, to thrive. We have never had to deal with problems of the scale facing today's globally interconnected society. No one knows for sure what will work, so it is important to build a system that can evolve and adapt rapidly.
>
> A variety of overlapping policies at city, sub-national, national, and international levels is more likely to succeed than are single, overarching binding agreements. Such an evolutionary approach to policy provides essential safety nets should one or more policies fail….This grassroots diversity in 'green policymaking' makes economic sense. 'Sustainable cities' attract the creative, educated people who want to live in a pollution-free, modern urban environment that suits their lifestyles. This is where future growth lies

Elinor Ostrom also advocates action at personal and local level, literally at the grassroots, as I do here. My commentary is about communities whose people come together and care for each other's well-being and the environment, and thus nourish and sustain one another. There is a need for more such communities throughout the world. Caring communities taken together amount to nourishing societies, which reduce hunger in the world, and also address employment, health, the environment, and transportation, in both high and low income places, locally and then broadly.

Caring communities are made up of people who live close to one another and interact regularly. Employment, housing, and other amenities are located in ways that enable many and even most of the residents to work close to where they live. Such communities typically have a management body and rules determined through highly participatory processes. Caring communities produce much of their own food, and manage energy, waste disposal and many other concerns. They strive to be sustainable, resilient, and self-reliant. In my commentary here, food is the main example of the nourishment all this creates, provides and sustains.

Sharing identity



Advertisement for Letchworth, Ebenezer Howard's garden city in the country, planned a century ago (left), and (right) one of many thousands of community gardens now, here in Eugene, Oregon, US

The idea of intentional design of communities has a long, honourable history. Ebenezer Howard's work as described in his *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (2) is just one of many examples. The Vauban District in Freiburg, Germany, offers many innovative ideas regarding final design and also planning (3). Charter Cities are intriguing, but with results yet to be assessed (4).Other movements have developed many good ideas (5,6). Many documents are available through the Fellowship for Intentional Community (7). There is much to be learned from all such initiatives.

Initiatives to design new communities or to redesign existing ones generally come out of a group's shared sense of problems and opportunities. Some groups may challenge the patterns of typical modern life in middle and high income settings. In many places there is sharp separation of rural from urban areas. It is hard to have a real community if people have to be away from dawn to dusk to earn money, and spend much of their time on roadways where no one wants to be. Many people want the components of their lives to be more fully integrated.

Some who call for simpler ways of life and less intensive use of the earth's resources ask for current sacrifices in exchange for future benefits for unknown others.

However, well-designed caring communities can provide immediate quality-of-life benefits at the same time as they address concerns for sustainability and related values. They can support a maturation process through which what seems to be individual sacrifice instead becomes understood as a gift to a society in which people are interacting parts. The emphasis shifts from preoccupation with belongings, to a more deeply satisfying focus on belonging (8).

We usually think of our living conditions as set and beyond anyone's control, but it is perfectly possible to break out of that mind-set. Small groups of people can create a new community or improve an existing community.

The core of strong caring communities is their social relationships, the ways in which people interact with one another. The physical facilities may be the best imaginable, and the flow of resources may be plentiful, but if people exploit or ignore each other, they can't have a strong community. Every home may have its own separate photovoltaic system and its own backyard aquaponics system, but such individualised arrangements have little or nothing to do with community and social building.

One primary function of caring communities is to ensure that people, personally and together, have more control over their own lives. Genuine human development is about increasing the capacity to define, analyse, and act on one's own concerns. This means building self-reliance. In his *Leaderless Revolution* former UK diplomat Carne Ross says (9):

> If we take back agency, and bring ourselves closer to managing our affairs for ourselves, then something else may also come about. We may find a fulfilment and satisfaction, and perhaps even a meaning, which so often seems elusive in the contemporary circumstance.

This is not just about how people act personally. It is about how people interact with each other, as social beings, in communion with one another. When well developed, communities will define, analyse, and act on their common concerns.

This means emphasis on community self-reliance, implying local control, as distinct from community self-sufficiency, which refers to local production of goods to meet local needs. Self-reliance allows for trade and other kinds of interactions with others, according to the community's best judgement about what would benefit its members and their environment (10).

Strong communities have systems to make their own decisions about what serves their interests. They are self-governing to the extent they can be in the context in which they are embedded. They establish methods for hearing personal views and for dealing with conflicts. There can be village or town hall style meetings in which all interested parties participate in discussing issues of concern to the community.

Community-centred ways of living support local self-reliance and also the principle of subsidiarity, the idea that social and political groups should help smaller ones

accomplish their respective ends without, however, usurping those tasks (11-13). To the extent feasible, how you live should be decided in your family and your community, not at higher levels of governance.

In existing communities there is usually no good way to control who lives there. But in new communities clear procedures can be set up for becoming a resident and also for leaving. Entry can be based on a combination of commitments to pay to enter (as one pays to enter a retirement community or a cruise ship), commitments to provide services to the community, and commitments to respect certain values. There can be contractual agreements that may have some fixed elements, common to all, but can also have personally negotiated elements. The community's managers should be open to creative proposals for entry.

As with the cruise ship metaphor, everyone on board makes a deliberate choice to be there. No one is there by accident or inertia. A newly designed community enables choice, including for people who already live on the site and are accommodated in the plan. People should be able to leave the community easily. Ensuring easy exit will place a limit on dissatisfaction. Unhappy people will leave.

Communities can be set up as rights-based social systems, governed by their charters and bye-laws, under rules shaped and endlessly refined by their participants. Unlike the global human rights system, in which rights appear to be formulated and interpreted by distant others, caring communities involve rights, obligations, and systems of accountability that are formulated locally, with full participation of the residents. All such achievements are lessons for society as a whole.

Social innovations can be introduced in the community that is created, and also in the planning process leading up to its creation. For example, a group in New Zealand, grounded in the Maori culture, developed *Tipu Ake*, a leadership model that can help them – and everybody else who learns from them – see organisations, teams and people as living organisms growing as part of an ecosystem (14). Comparably, Frances Moore Lappé in her *EcoMind: Changing the Way We Think, To Create the World We Want.* calls for a comparable ecology-oriented way of thinking (15). So does Elinor Ostrom in her *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*.(16) and also Elisabet Sahtouris (17). Such innovative approaches to starting up communities can be adapted to serve in theiir day-to-day governance.

Each new intentionally designed community is best seen as one example in a network of such communities which all together amount to societies. Most will have some features in common, but each will also have its own distinctive character, depending on who designs it, who lives in it, and how everybody works together. At one site the community may be bound together by the participants' interest in cultural preservation, in another by their interest in agro-ecology, and in another it could be shared religious faith. The various sites will be diverse and accommodate many different people through that diversity.

Nourishing one another



The permaculture model of sustainable society (left) originated in Australia, is practised worldwide. A long-established largely self-sufficient community is in Findhorn in the North of Scotland (right)

Caring in any community is strengthened when people – adults and children – choose to spend more time working and playing together. Social interaction can be enhanced through the ways in which businesses and recreational and cultural activities are organised. Hunger is less likely in communities with more social activity of any type. The risk of going hungry will be especially low if there are many food-related activities carried out by groups.

There can be a community farm or smallholding, managed as a cooperative by those residents who wish to participate in it. The housing units, many with their own gardens, can be arrayed around this centre of production. There can be retail shops and restaurants and a commercial kitchen available for small-scale food processing, teaching, and preparation of festival meals.

People can garden together, cook together, and eat together in many different settings. Food-related skills can be strengthened through the sharing of knowledge and hands-on experience. People who are facing difficulties can be offered food packages or meals, and can also be given support in learning how to grow food, shop better, and cook for themselves (18). Communities can establish local food policy councils to be permanently attentive to local food and nutrition issues (10,19). Instead of marketing food through supermarkets owned by outsiders, increasing emphasis can be placed on community supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and locally owned markets, including cooperatives. In Chicago, local groups are addressing the problem of food deserts by selling fruits and vegetables from a bus that makes regular visits to the neighbourhoods (20).

Local gardeners can set up their own groups, and learn from civil society organisations and social movements such as the American Community Gardening Association, whose primary purpose is to build community through gardening. Farms, markets, and restaurants can be set up as cooperatives of various forms. There are organisations that advise on how to set up cooperatives in harmony with

local cultural practices and traditions (21). Northern Italy demonstrates the benefits of having entire regions organise their businesses as cooperatives (22).

Permaculture specialists have shown great skill in applying their broad principles in ways that harmonise with local physical environments and with local cultures, and use social processes that encourage community building (23,24). Increasingly, people are coming to understand that they are not separate from their food systems, but are in them, and must live synergistically with them.

Commercial food production serves people with money, because it is designed to produce good incomes for the producers. Government agencies at every level tend to favour the same middle- and high-income people. People with low incomes and little political power often get their food outside the dominant commercial system by producing food themselves on subsistence farms or backyard gardens, by purchasing from small-scale farmers who have little access to major markets, and by cooperative efforts such as community gardens.

Community-based food production is based on the recognition that while participants might have little cash income, they have other kinds of wealth such as their labour power, their motivation, and their knowledge of the local culture and the local environment. There is natural wealth in the local land, water, and sunshine that can be used in sustainable ways. Strong communities also have an important asset in that their members care about one another's well-being.

The inputs to community-based food operations are different from those used by commercial ones, and their managers are likely to have different priorities regarding what are the important outputs. With their traditional economics, community-based food operations might be feasible even where commercial operations are not.

The nutritional benefits of producing food together cannot be measured by assessing the food itself. Working together establishes a kind of social safety net through its strengthening of the community. No one has measured that, but there is no reason to doubt its reality.

Creating a new community primarily for people with high-incomes is relatively easy. Doing this for people with low incomes is more challenging. People can be hugely resourceful, and accomplish a great deal even on what others might regard as useless land. There are many places in which communities have produced much of their food even on rocky, mountainous, or arid terrain. The potentials for producing food under difficult conditions are demonstrated by the ways in which people have established productive gardens in times of war (25).

The community farm can provide full- or part-time employment for many of the residents. Those involved in the farm will provide the labour and skills that are needed and also participate in its joint management. They can receive some

combination of cash payment and produce from the farm under rules and procedures established by the managers. Whether or not they work on the farm, residents can purchase produce from the farm in the community market. For some residents, the purchased produce will complement the produce from their own home gardens. Arrangements can be made for sales of the produce to outsiders, for example at a scheduled farmers' market at the periphery of the site, or by use of trucks that retail the produce in areas outside the community (26).

Creating well-being



In South Los Angeles (left) and elsewhere, guerrilla gardeners take over underused and misused land In Hawai'i (right) and elsewhere, groups are harvesting food discarded by shops and giving it away

Apart from the farm, new communities are good places for trying out innovative business models such as those advocated by the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (27). They:

> Connect the dots between the building blocks of a local living economy – sustainable local food systems, green building, energy efficiency and renewable energy, local zero waste manufacturing, community capital, and others – within the context of their local economies. These building blocks represent the basic pillars of most local economies.

Food problems are intricately tied in with other kind of issues, so they cannot be remedied in isolation. The entire cluster can be addressed together by finding better ways to live together.

The need for communities to give attention not only to the technical aspects of their food systems, but also the quality of human relationships is clearly recognised in the Global Ecovillage Network (28), which:

> Offers inspiring examples of how people and communities can live healthy, cooperative, genuinely happy and meaningful lifestyles --- beacons of hope that help in the transition to a more sustainable future on Earth. We foster a culture of mutual respect, sharing, inclusiveness, positive intent, and fair energy exchange.

They are concerned specifically with communal pathways to sustainable living. The Global Ecovillage Network website offers a variety of resources offering how-to-do

it guidance for creating and operating what have been described here as caring communities.

The distribution of most food and other goods can follow conventional marketing methods, but people in caring communities are also likely to share their gardens' produce with their neighbours, or they share products like preserves, breads, and cakes. Sharing of this sort can be radical. In the British town of Todmorden, for example, people raise fruits and vegetables and invite others to harvest them even without asking (29-31). Some small farms in Detroit supply vegetables for anyone who wants them, there for the taking (32). In South Central Los Angeles, Ron Finley and countless others in the global guerrilla gardener movement are planting vegetable and fruit as well as flower gardens in abandoned lots and traffic medians (33).

Food sharing is routine, especially in low-income communities (34). It can be enhanced in many ways, including regular community festivals and pot-luck meals, perhaps on the basis of a regular schedule. Soup kitchens of various forms can be established (35). The sense of community can lead to many different food projects, and those projects in turn can help to build the sense of community (36).

The website at www.shareable.net offers ideas for creative sharing, including many centred on food. The civil society organisation Heifer International promotes sharing systematically through *Passing on the Gift*, a programme in which low-income people who receive donated animals share the offspring of their animals – along with their knowledge, resources, and skills – in an expanding network of hope, dignity and self-reliance (37). The sharing of breastmilk is now being supported in systematic ways (38).

One method for sharing food is to set up tables at farmers' markets to acquire and accept excess vegetables and fruits and other fresh foods and give them to other people who need them. Vivian Best began doing this in Hawai'i in 2010, with a table, a wicker basket from Goodwill and a couple of poster boards decorated with doodles of vegetables (39):

> Now, her Give It Fresh Today program accepts more than 24,000 pounds of food annually, of which 200 to 250 pounds per week come from its table at the KCC [Kapi'olani Community College] farmers' market. The nonprofit Aloha Harvest picks up the food, as does Unity Church, and delivers the goods to various outlets that provide nourishment to impoverished and homeless people throughout Oahu.
>
> This is changing the way people view their excess, says Best. In the past you'd bring a box of avocados to work, people would get sick of all the avocados. Sometimes, you can't eat all the fruit from your trees, so GIFT gets people to think about their food waste. There are families who come to the table, they take a little bit out of each bag, one cucumber, one tomato, two ears of corn. It's changing people's shopping habits.

In another creative method of sharing (40):

> A charitable man who wishes to remain anonymous recently installed a refrigerator outside of his home in Hail, Saudi Arabia. His neighbours can leave their excess food inside the refrigerator where it is kept fresh and clean. Needy people can then anonymously use this excess food without the shame of begging.

People living in communities are likely to share not only food but also many other things, such as their books, tools, skills, and labour.

Amassing wealth

We spend too much time hoping that national and global agencies will address great challenges such as conflict, poverty, hunger, pollution, and resource depletion. These have not been very successful. But now, in Elinor Ostrom's words (1):

> Sustainability at local and national levels must add up to global sustainability. This idea must form the bedrock of national economies and constitute the fabric of our societies. The goal now must be to build sustainability into the DNA of our globally interconnected society.

It is time for more and more of us to go beyond talking about how we ought to live, and move from ideas and beliefs to action. We can begin in our communities, creating better lives for ourselves and for others. When we create models that are really good, others will emulate them. When we find ways to live well together, no one will go hungry, we will avoid other miseries, and we will discover that living in a caring community is itself nourishing and thus a form of wealth.

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Status

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