Triple Crisis Prompts Shift from Vulnerable to Rooted Agriculture

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As long ago as 1999, I argued that neoliberalism – the Washington Consensus – was cracked and that the development debate would once again open up. Now, after research in the Philippines and after studying the food prices crises of the past four years, I have become convinced that the crisis of food and farming could well be the catalyst for several countries to shift away from free-market policies. At the very least, some countries are shifting from more “vulnerable” to more “rooted” agriculture.

My most recent article on this subject, coauthored with John Cavanagh (director of the Institute for Policy Studies), was recently published in the Journal of Peasant Studies. We point out that a lot of countries have been left vulnerable in agriculture to the cruel batterings of volatile global markets.

Agriculture has been transformed over the past five centuries by trade and colonialism from a once “rooted” activity to an increasingly “vulnerable” one. A half century ago, most countries began embracing new technologies such as the Green Revolution, making them dependent on imports of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and seeds. Most governments gave incentives for farmers to export more of what they produced and, in most countries, imports of food grew as well.

Neoliberalism’s emphasis on trading more and more of a country’s food output has had profound impacts. Take grains, important because most people in the world get the bulk of their calories from basic grains. In almost all countries, this means wheat or rice or corn. As a result of neoliberalism, over the past few decades, many countries have become dependent on imports for these vital food items.

Recent trade figures from the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO) illuminate just how dependent and vulnerable some nations have become: Haiti’s number one grain is rice, and it imports over 80 percent of what Haitians eat. Mexico, the birthplace of corn, had its food markets ripped open by the North American Free Trade Agreement: Mexico now imports most of its corn consumption. Or take Egypt. Today, it is one of the world’s largest wheat importers — importing over half the wheat that its people eat (again, based on UN FAO data). As a result, ordinary Egyptians are held hostage to the whims of manipulative trading by speculators on commodity futures markets and to weather catastrophes in other countries.

There are food vulnerability lessons to be learned as well from sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the sub-Saharan countries are less food-import-dependent than nations in Latin America and Asia or the “protest belt” in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco; hence they are less affected by spiraling food prices. In addition, as food prices have risen, there is now evidence that in several of these sub-Saharan countries, people are returning to native-grown cassava and sorghum in place of imported food.

Amidst this crisis for import-dependent countries, while millions were already suffering as the result of vulnerable development models, the food price crisis of 2011 further rocked the debate. In these recent years of food price and supply volatility, millions of small-scale farmers are making the transition from vulnerable import-dependent, chemical agriculture to rooted chemical-free agriculture.

But what exactly is the implication of this for the larger development debate? To answer this question we traveled to the Philippines to spend time with farmers making this shift, to understand how they view their choices, their past, and their future.

To summarize what we found: some combination of economic, social and environmental ‘vulnerability’ versus ‘rootedness’ factors is motivating a shift among some small-scale Philippine rice farmers from chemical to organic rice farming. On the economic front, farmers were excited about the large drop in costs as they abandon chemical fertilizers and pesticides (that had to be purchased along with seeds and other inputs, often leading to mounting debts). Most told us that yields fell only marginally if at all, with the result of higher incomes. Many found that yields actually increased after two or three crop cycles as the soil became more fertile with the end of chemical inputs.

On the health side, farmers and consumers alike experience better health with reduced contact with pesticides and their dangerous residues. And, on the environmental front, less chemical inputs means less greenhouse gas emissions.

In sum, our field research suggests many small-scale farmers internalize a triple-bottom line that is some combination of economic, social, and environmental. (For more details on these interviews and results, see the Journal of Peasant Studies.)
Studies article.)

Part of what is significant about what we found in our Philippine research is the extent to which it meshes with the academic literature and research from other parts of the world in its account of what motivates small-scale farmers to transition (or not to transition) to sustainable agriculture, and on the post-transition results in economic, social and environmental terms.

Our research results are in accord with what UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier de Schutter found recently. His report presents substantial empirical evidence, across many crops and countries (including that of Miguel Altieri in Latin America and Jules Pretty in Africa), of major increases in yields for farmers practicing agro-ecology. De Schutter’s review explicitly goes beyond economics to social and environmental arguments. As he emphasizes: “We won’t solve hunger and stop climate change with industrial farming on large plantations. The solution lies in supporting small-scale farmers’ knowledge and experimentation, and in raising incomes of smallholders so as to contribute to rural development.”

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1. foakleys says:
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They will misbalance their portfolio by buying all small stocks or all growth stocks, or some other misbalanced assortment of stocks. Back in 2000, Some people bought all Internet stocks; they got burnt when they all crashed together. In 2007/2008, as mentioned by Delos Chang, drug wars really wrecked some currencies.