

Food Justice: What is the work to be done?

Eleanor Kinross, Edinburgh, November 2016

*Here lies our land: every airt
Beneath swift clouds, glad glints of sun,
Belonging to none but itself.
We are mere transients, who sing
Its westlin' winds and fernie braes,
Northern lights and siller tides,
Small folk playing our part.
'Come all ye', the country says,
You win me, who take me most to heart.
– Kathleen Jamie*



Get away with you gangsters

We don't want it

Get away with you gangsters

We don't like it

Eternal love eternal love

Money money money

Root of all evil

Money money money

Root of all evil

– Massive Attack

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” Declaration of Nyeleni 2007 Mali

For 5 days, in Cluj- Napoca Romania 2016, 600 farmers, fishers, pastoralists, indigenous people, consumers, trade unions, environmental/justice/solidarity/human rights organizations, community-based food movements, journalists, researchers from more than 42 countries brought together existing food sovereignty initiatives, sharing and connecting experiences and planning a pan-European strategy and plan for future food and agriculture. I was one of that number, I went as part of the Scottish delegation representing the Urban Gardening and Community Development project centred around the Jack Kane Community Centre in Craigmillar Edinburgh. These are my reflections on an event which was at times over-whelming, provocative, affirming and compelling. The emerging themes for me were education, food poverty, access to land and global justice.

The backdrop to the Scottish delegations conversations were independence, Brexit and the complete corporate ownership of food production, distribution and retail within which we exist. Food and farming in Scotland is dominated by the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy and the way in which the Westminster Government has chosen to apply it in the UK. This has led to increased intensification of crops, larger farms and the decline of fruit and vegetable growing. Many of the other delegations were also part of CAP but it was clear from conversations that I had that the UK had pursued the intensification model more vigorously than many others. Brexit was a central issue to many of the discussions I had with other delegates, and something about which other delegates were very curious. Scotland’s ambiguous situation meant that I was looking at the issues from both the perspective of remaining in the EU or leaving. It was clear to me that despite all the inequalities that the CAP presents that Brexit has the potential to be more of a threat to the development of food justice within Scotland. Although it does offer us the opportunity for radical policies to promote food justice and protect farmers in Scotland I fear that the de-regulation, free trade arguments of the UK Tory government will have a much louder voice in a post-Brexit UK than if we remain in the EU. This de-regulation could potentially erode the protection of workers’ rights and the environment and leave us open to damaging trade deals. We have greater potential for progressive policies if we could stand with other groups within the EU to argue for a fairer deal than to try to make these arguments within the UK.

Who was there, who was heard, who was missing? The Scottish delegation was small and collaborative however we were not very diverse. We were lacking in ethnic diversity and we were also missing the voices of fishermen and small-scale farmers. This is something to consider as we move forward on our journey. **Amongst the other voices at the forum I heard a clear and coherent message of struggle from those countries in Europe particularly France and Spain with a peasant agricultural community.** This message was vital in highlighting the struggles of the small-scale producers who remain in Europe and the policies which have been useful to them in protecting their land and resources. However, it did not contain the messages of social justice that I was hearing from other places. It was also difficult to convey to this group the extent to which small-scale ecological food production has vanished within Scotland. I heard from people from Austria, Germany and the Netherlands who identified with this disappearance of their native peasant agriculture. In these countries the biggest challenges were around protecting the rights of migrant workers as people move across Europe looking for work. I spoke to farmers from Slovakia and Poland who talked of the provision governments were making for new farmers and to preserve the small-scale ownership of land but also heard views expressed about the roles of refugees that made me concerned for workers’ rights in these countries. I heard stories from Greece and Italy of extreme exploitation

of migrants and refugees in the agricultural sector as well as stories of co-operative and solidarity movements who were effecting changes in government policy.

La Via Campesina (the international peasants movement) was represented by people from the Global South and by the European Coordination of Via Campesina (ECVC). Their message was clear; a cry for solidarity from the Global South. **They ask for our solidarity in rejecting this model of food production which continues to heap injustice upon environmental destruction upon hunger in pursuit of the profit that can be made by selling cheap food to us in the Global North.** Amongst all the talk of peasants and farmers it was difficult to find a place for my experience in urban growing projects and the people that I represented; the community of Craigmillar a diverse urban area which has been marginalized and deprived within the Global North, within the UK for centuries. However it was by reflecting on how to respond to this plea that I found the answer; this cry for solidarity is not just to the rich of the Global North who can choose to spend time and money seeking out 'good food' but to all of us however dispossessed we are, and in this request is also the answer to our own struggles.

Our current food system in Scotland is characterized by inequality and exploitation at all levels. The elements which are most evident in Craigmillar are the low wages, insecure working conditions, and harsh reform of social security which means that rising numbers of people can no longer afford a nutritious diet. People are being forced to take the supermarkets 'saver' brands which are the most damaging environmentally and the poorest in terms of nutrition. In addition to this our collective food environment, in particular the advertising and promotion of unhealthy food by the supermarkets, makes it difficult for people to make positive food choices, resulting in significant diet-related health inequalities.

In the Global North we are both the exploiter and the exploited. How we eat here has a huge impact on the people of the Global South. By exploiting our need for cheap food the supermarkets are forcing us to exploit small-scale farmers in other parts of the world and the only winners are the corporate owners of the industrial food system. We need to find alternatives which feed us good food and which in turn allow us to step out of the prescribed roles of exploiter and exploited that the corporate food system would hold us in.

We can build solidarity and alternatives through community education. For me we need to bring conversations about food justice into our wider conversations about community empowerment, politicization and social justice. We need to bring the conversation of the food system right into our communities. We can do this by celebrating the diversity of food traditions in our communities and building on our connection to place. We can co-create the knowledge that we need to begin to cook, grow and eat the food we want. We can continue to campaign for access to land to grow our own food because in this way we can step outside the monetized food system. We re-connect to skills which support autonomy like seed saving, food growing and cooking from scratch! We can establish mentor schemes, skills exchanges and forums to present opportunities for peer to peer learning.

Access to land is key to allowing people of the Global North or South to step aside from the prescribe roles of exploited and exploiter and stand autonomous from the money-driven industrial food system. It is vital both in rural farming areas, for new agro-ecological enterprises and within urban environments. Community gardens and urban agriculture can also allow us an opportunity to re-engage with traditional ideas of the commons and of collective rights. I heard of the impact of progressive policies and community initiatives in France and Eastern Europe to retain land for farming and to support new entrants into farming. These ideas are taking root in Scotland and the wider UK with the Scottish Governments Land Reform process and initiatives like the Ecological Land Trust.

Food Poverty has many forms and varies from place to place. Food is a human right; in a Scottish sense this means that everyone in this country should be able to afford the food they want to eat and that the food

available was healthy, with no hidden environmental costs and was produced without exploiting other in the pursuit of profit. In this sense food poverty in Scotland is indistinguishable from other forms of poverty as it resides in a lack of money. However, in other countries food poverty is reduced and to some extent differentiated from other poverty in those areas where people still have access to growing their own food and the skills with which to do so. We can reduce food poverty in Scotland for people by claiming the right to the resources that we need to grow our own food. The danger here is that marginalized people are then forced into subsistence growing whether it is part of their own individual desire or not. So social enterprises, market gardens, food co-operatives and local markets in our communities fed by a network of agro-ecological farms are all an essential part of the solution and form the basis of our vision of food justice in Scotland.

Coming home and rolling up my sleeves to the work that needs to be done. As a result of the working groups that I took part in at the forum, I am now involved in a number of ongoing actions which link into my work at Jack Kane. I am part of the emerging discussion about how we democratize education around food. How does the principal of peer to peer learning and peasant to peasant learning apply in our context? How do we ensure that the marginalized and dispossessed have control of the conversation and the learning? Community gardens and urban agriculture are vital in the diversity and inclusiveness that they represent in the Food Justice movement, how do we ensure that these voices are heard? I have also been invited to be part of the coordinating group for the Gaia Foundations Seed Justice Program which is a UK wide project and includes regional coordinators as part of the funding bid. I feel this can be an excellent starting point for a Scottish Seed Network and I am motivated to build on the seed saving skills we have at Jack Kane and in Scotland more generally to begin the work of education and infrastructure that is needed for a Scottish Seed network.

A diversity of voices is essential to understanding the full impacts of our actions and campaigns. The work at hand is no more or less than the fight for global justice, but the tools of food justice give us reasons to be hopeful and creative. Community-based peer to peer learning to reconnect ourselves with the tools for food autonomy; growing food, cooking, collecting and sharing seeds, and the building of solidarity with the Global South. At Jack Kane this means the continued work to politicize and inform our community, ensuring there is a space to grow food for everyone who wants it, food sharing, cooking and growing workshops, volunteer led activities and discussions and sharing of stories from all the members of our community. More widely in Scotland it means building opportunities to share practice and resources between everyone involved in food in Scotland, working for land reform and a rights-based approach to food from the Scottish government, and refusing to allow the profit-driven supermarkets to define our relationship to our food and other people across the world.

