

Farm Women and Local Alternatives to Globalized Agriculture

KAREN KRUG

Cet article est un sommaire des résultats négatifs de la mondialisation de l'agriculture et utilise des courtes histoires de cas pour montrer comment des femmes ont été intéressées par des approches alternatives de production d'aliments qui préconisent un style de vie selon le développement durable et apportent un soutien à une population et à un environnement plus sanitaires.

Much of farm and rural women's analysis of their agricultural context highlights problems especially pertinent to rural women—gender stereotypes, devaluing of women's contributions, triple work days, male dominated farm organisations, unjust legislation, inequitable distribution of land, vulnerability to poverty, domestic violence, inadequate services such as childcare, etc. (Krug). As agricultural women describe the social, ecological and economic problems in their context, they name not only themselves but others as victims. They broaden the identity of the oppressed to include rural and farm men and children, the poor in other parts of the world, and the environment. Thus, paying special attention to rural women's voices is one way of beginning to understand how the existing agricultural system has produced so many forms of oppression. Because at least some agricultural women recognize the system of agriculture to be global, they extend their analysis to the international sphere. They themselves make clear connections between what is happening in their own context and what is taking place elsewhere.

The Globalization of Agriculture

Agriculture has become part of the trend toward globalization. Simply put, globalization is "that process which has led to the creation of a single, international (global) financial or capital market." (Lind 31). Writing in reference to the World Trade Organization's endorsement of globalization, Helen Caldicott observes that "globalisation involve[s] four mantras—'free trade,' 'deregulation,' 'privatisation' and 'commodification'—the last meaning that even the genetic basis of life itself can be bought and sold"

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(1) Each of these impulses is clearly felt in the food and agriculture sector, and is linked to the global, capitalist economic system, and reinforced by the policies of the Uruguay Round of the GATT implemented through the World Trade Organization (WEDO). The creation of a global economy is the driving force for the direction of change in agriculture. As Steven Shrybman so concisely puts it, globalization is reflected in the:

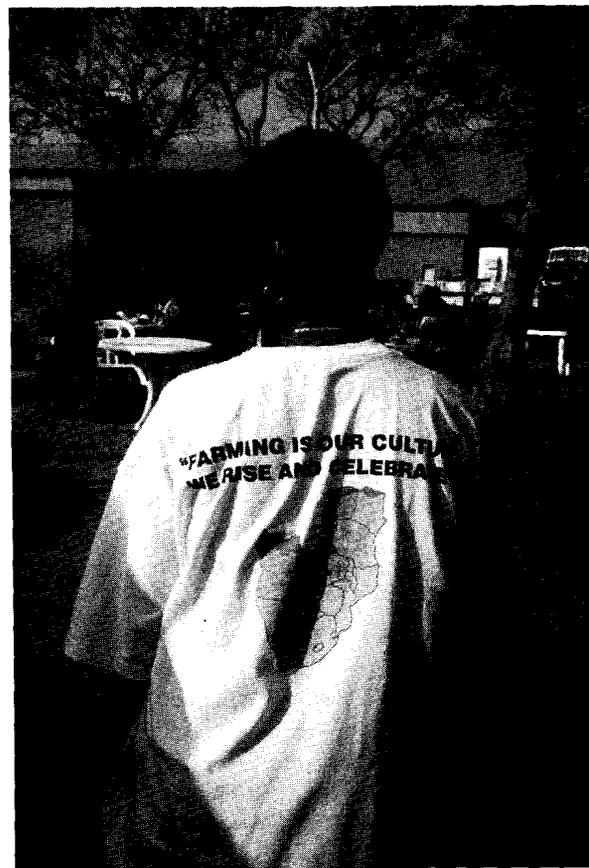
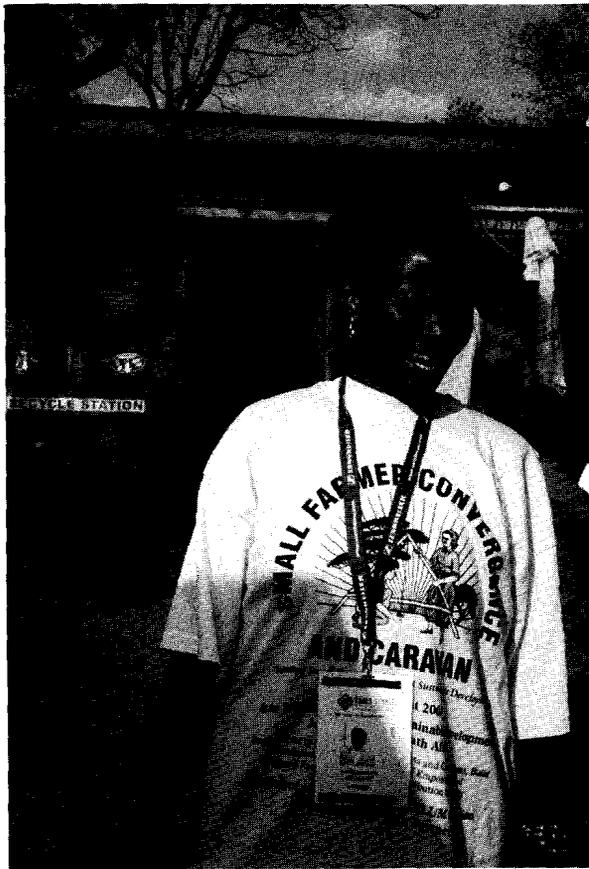
free trade vision of an integrated global agricultural economy, [in which] every region of the world would become a producer of specialized agricultural commodities, supplying its own needs by shop-

ping in the global marketplace. Food is grown, not by farmers for local consumers, but by large corporations for global markets. As local production and supply systems are displaced by regional and international ones, agricultural commodities need to be transported over increasingly longer distances, and be processed and packaged to survive the journey. The thrust of the present trade policies, such as those engendered in the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, is to consolidate and extend those global systems of agricultural production and trade. (2-3)

Impacts of Globalized Agriculture

In essence, globalized agriculture is a system in which a few very large corporations with footholds in countries throughout the world, come to control: who grows, what is grown, how and where these products are grown, and who gets them (Wiebe). As noted above, the logic of this global system is that those who are most competitive grow the type of food or fibre that they can grow more cheaply than anyone else, grow it wherever it can be grown most cheaply, grow it using an industrial agriculture approach (that is, agriculture which aims for high productivity, uses high-inputs and advanced technology, and is export-oriented), and sell it to whomever can pay the most for it.

For typical consumers in Canada, this system has two



Participant at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, 2002. Photo: Brenda Cranney

obvious advantages. The first is that those of us who are wealthy enough, can buy produce grown in almost any part of the world, no matter what season it is. The second is that we have access to relatively cheap food. From the perspective of uninformed consumers, these appear to be tangible benefits. We can eat exotic food without traveling overseas, and we can do so cheaply (Stauber).

However, the system that allows food from all over the world to appear in Canadian supermarkets is the same system that makes tomatoes grown in Mexico and transported to Canada cheaper than tomatoes grown locally (Kneen). Farmers from other countries receive income from our citizens' food purchases. The spoils are divided along the way by a host of intermediaries, including: retailers, wholesalers, and shippers, most with direct ties to some of the world's largest transnational corporations (WEDO). This reality has consequences for our economy, since fewer Canadian farmers generate an income from growing food, and rural agricultural communities are decimated (Stabler, Olfert and Fulton). In addition, we lose control of our food supply, and eventually may become dependent upon food produced, priced and distributed by others—leading to food insecurity (Mougeot; Maxwell; Power).

These costs might be acceptable if it were truly efficiency and superior growing conditions producing the cost savings on imported food. However, in most instances true efficiency and environmental suitability are not at the root of cost-savings. In some cases, the reason imported food may be cheaper than domestic has to do with exploitation of labourers—for instance, working conditions and wages paid to fruit and vegetable pickers or to growers themselves may be miserable (Barron; Sachs). In other cases, it is due to lax environmental standards, so that chemicals banned or with restrictions in one region are used carelessly in another (Martinez-Salazar). Furthermore, the whole industry is riddled with hidden subsidies. Those for fossil fuels particularly distort the analysis of efficiency—falsely making high intensity, technological-based agriculture look more efficient than labour-intensive, low-technology methods (Benyus).

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, this global agriculture system leads directly away from the two most positive dimensions of globalization—one, the realization that we are all part of a single global commons, and two, increased respect for the richness that comes from distinctive cultures and diversity in general. The competitive nature of intensive agriculture ignores (or at least treats as subordinate) all non-economic values—such as the universal right to healthy, nutritious food or the importance of ecosystem integrity. One of the negative environmental impacts of the globalized agriculture system is the decrease in genetic diversity. Although we have increased access to a whole range of foods, the varieties of plants that are consumed worldwide is declining. The efficiency model upon which global agriculture is predicated supports the

production of vast tracts of monoculture crops, grown from whichever are believed to be the highest yielding seeds—or, more recently, whichever seeds have been engineered to obtain the “best” combination of desirable characteristics (Katebrell). Loss of biodiversity is a direct consequence of such an approach (IDRC).

The loss of cultural diversity is another consequence of the prevailing global agriculture system. In fact, the word “agribusiness”—sometimes used to replace “agriculture”—accurately reflects this devaluing of culture. The loss of cultural traditions takes place in different ways in different contexts. In some countries, indigenous cultures have been wiped out as cash-cropping of products for export supplants local production of diverse crops using traditional methods. Because Canada is a relatively young country made up of a mosaic of cultural traditions from the diverse countries of origin of its immigrants, the loss of distinctive traditions is less acute here than elsewhere. However, many of Canada’s small family farmers are quick to point out that their whole way of life is threatened (O’Hanlon; Strange). Most have had to supplement their farm income with earnings from jobs off the farm. [Only 8 per cent of Canada’s farm families earn 75 per cent or more of their income from farming and 65 per cent earn less than 25 per cent of their income from farming (Solomon)]. The small-scale, family-run, mixed farm operations in which all family members were participants have all but disappeared. And with the increase in farm size and focus on centralization characteristic of globalized agriculture (Lembeck; Corbett), in Canada, rural agricultural communities with an agrarian flavour are disappearing (Stabler, Olfert, Fulton).

The system that provides single answers to the questions of who grows, what is grown, how products are grown and who gets them, eliminates that which has traditionally been foundational to the development of distinct cultures. Until the very recent past, food and its means of production and distribution has been the most influential factor in shaping the way of life typical of agrarian-based cultures. Most cultural festivities were tied to planting or harvest times, and the typical diet reflected the distinctive foods native to the region. Dress, architecture, customs, cuisine, and dialects were all intertwined with native regions and their natural resources. With the entrenchment of cash-crop, natural resource export-based economies and technology-driven, “value-added” export-based economies, these distinctive settings have begun to break down and to be assimilated, leading to the loss of cultural diversity (Buntzel-Cano, Rudolf and Marta Cano).

The recognition that life on this planet depends upon the integrity of an interconnected ecosystem is actually obscured in the global agriculture system that privileges profit-making at the expense of other values. Likewise, the richness of cultural differences is ignored, in the quest for ever higher levels of production of standardized, transportable products suitable for export by global elites to the privileged around the world. The decline of cultural diversity is linked to the decline in biodiversity, for the same system leads to drastic reductions in the variety of plants grown on the vast tracts of arable land used by humans to feed themselves and to the loss of distinctive cultures shaped by relationships with the varieties of foods distinctive to particular regions. That globalized agriculture leads away from the most positive dimensions of globalization—one, its insistence that we are all connected in some vital ways, and, two, its respect for cultural distinctiveness—is a warning sign of its limitations.

Alternatives to Globalized Agriculture

Heeding these early warning signs should lead us, as a society, to explore

alternatives to globalized agriculture. Various writers promote the re-emergence of an updated, more localized approach for agriculture (for example, Strange; Ross; McNealy; Katebrell; Rowe), arguing it is more consistent with the route to a sustainable society (Morris) And, in fact, alternatives grounded in a more localized approach are springing up throughout the world (Benyus). Women are an important driving force in these movements toward locally-based agrarianism.

The approaches taken may address the production and/or the distribution end of agriculture. *Farmer’s markets*, long part of the food system in agrarian countries, are experiencing a resurgence in industrialized countries. They provide a mechanism for producers to exchange goods or sell their surplus produce directly to consumers close to where those products were grown. While their primary service occurs at the distribution level, they also affect the production end by allowing farmers to grow more diverse products using alternative approaches and by influencing the appetites of consumers. Another program aimed largely at addressing distribution issues is *The Good Food Box*. Fresh fruits and vegetables are bought in bulk by a central agency, then divided into boxes and distributed to regional clusters of ten or so customers. Customers who opt into the program pay at the beginning of the month and receive a box of fresh produce a few weeks into the month. Whenever possible, local and non-

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traditional growers are supported through bulk purchases. Thus, alternative production is supported indirectly. *Community shared agriculture* (CSA) is structured so as to support local, alternative food production and to market directly to consumers. The basic concept of the CSA is that members of a community can share in the risks and benefits of farming by paying a farmer in advance for a share of the crops produced, and often by contributing labour throughout the growing season. Farmers and customers tend to favour organically grown food, heritage crops and diverse types of foods—thereby fostering biodiversity and environmentally sound production methods. CSA has the potential to engage the wider community in a locally-controlled food production and distribution system that circumvents the globalized industrialized agriculture system. Another approach that leads to local food production is that of community gardens. Individuals who may not have access to land suitable for food production may rent plots, often from local governments, for nominal fees, in order to grow their own food. To the extent that they are able to grow food for their own consumption, community gardeners are exercising control over who grows their food, what is grown and how it is grown, who gets it, and to some degree where it is grown. *Permaculture* shares with community gardening this ability to circumvent the globalized agriculture system, however, it is based on a particular philosophy and extends beyond food production to include a lifestyle that corresponds to the local landscape (Mollison). The permaculture philosophy is that, by emulating nature but improving its design to satisfy human food needs, it is possible to establish permanent agriculture appropriate to the characteristics of almost any location (including urban settings). Rather than growing primarily annuals, native varieties of perennials are established and left to grow with relatively little maintenance. Where possible, housing design is modified or constructed to capitalize upon natural features for energy efficiency, aesthetics and comfort. This approach can be applied at any scale from the individual home and yard to planned eco-communities. The ideas of working with nature and letting nature do much of the work are integral to the philosophy of permaculture. Of the options described above, permaculture is the most comprehensive and integrated alternative to the global industrialized model of agriculture, yet in some ways all the options discussed promote movement away from the global industrialized agriculture standard. In many cases, as the examples which follow illustrate, several of these approaches are combined in one local agriculture enterprise.

Ontario Farm Women and Alternative Agriculture

Farm women are often motivated by a desire to raise their families in a context that allows children to grow up in a stimulating, healthy environment, surrounded by the kinds of influences believed to be positive. However,

many come to farming out of a commitment to sustainability not only for their immediate families, but for the broader community and ecosphere. Whether working alone, with partners, with family, or in community, these ethically motivated growers seek to live out alternative values. In doing so, they are challenging the norms of the dominant, globalized agriculture system while educating consumers. Below are brief samples of some farm women's approaches to local agriculture.

Heather and Kate work alongside one another on a 100-acre nature haven near Palmerston, Ontario. The land is 50 per cent forest, and has abundant trails for hiking. The farm is totally off the grid—with solar power for lights, computer and television, and propane for a stove and fridge (also cooled in winter with outside air). Instead of plumbing, they rely on a compost toilet and well water, solar-heated. Buildings are passively solar heated, also heated with wood from the land, and use mostly reclaimed materials along with some strawbale construction. While the farm women have not yet made a living off the land, they have one acre of Echinacea that they sell directly to consumers and to naturopaths; tincture hawthorn berries from the trees on the property for use as a heart remedy; sell heritage roses to nurseries; grow native plants that are sold for restoration projects; produce medicinals, rare and endangered plants; and grow food for their own consumption. When a stream at the back of their property was polluted by a neighbour spreading manure, Heather found herself working with 22 agencies to find solutions to the problems with the Maitland River Watershed. Girl guides and other groups have begun asking about using their property for camp-outs and hikes. In pursuing a way of life they believe in, these women are living lightly on the land themselves, are employed at work that helps rather than harms nature and human health, are addressing environmental issues in the community, and educating others about sustainability by example.

Kathy and Linda work along with Greg at Everdale Place—a non-profit corporation that has evolved into a CSA, market garden and learning centre. They rent the two houses on the property, which are owned by the corporation. The entire farm is 52.7 acres, with five acres of woodlot. The food garden for the CSA is 2.5 acres. Ten per cent of the food goes to the CSA shares, while the remaining amount is sold as market produce to stores and restaurants in Toronto. Among the extensive tree plantings are 50 apple and 20 pear trees, which will eventually supply CSA participants. Everdale farm hires students and supports two apprentices during the growing season. Maintaining the farm for the long term is the primary goal of this project, but in addition to this ecological goal, it and the farm workers provide services by supplying community residents with organically grown food, offering environmental education workshops, providing employment for students, and supplying locally grown food to the Toronto market.

Leanne, an agriculture diploma student, lives with her husband, Jim, and three boys on a well-wooded property with streams throughout. They have replanted 15 acres with trees. In the mid-'80s Jim built their passive solar house, which is heated with an extremely efficient wood stove. They use a wood stove for cooking. A thermosyphoning water jacket in the wood stove preheats water that moves to a double-boiler hot water tank. They recently added hydro to accommodate the needs of their children, and now both have off-farm jobs to supplement their income. Their farm enterprises include commercial garlic and asparagus as well as Shitake mushrooms (grown on 1500 logs). Leanne says that their primary goal is to have a good place for the kids, and that they take seriously their responsibility to improve the land.

For years, Jan and Ted worked off farm to support changes to their 100-acre farm (near Goderich, Ontario) which they bought in 1975. They began living in the barn and eventually built two additional barns and a passive solar house with an attached solar greenhouse. They heat with a wood stove in winter, have a water-pumping windmill, and a grid-connected wind generator. They pre-heat water with solar panels and supplement this with a wood stove thermosyphoning unit. Jan did a study at the University of Guelph that showed how much more efficient and environmentally benign horses are than tractors, so they use mares for many of their farm tasks. The farm runs a CSA for 30 to 40 families. They have a three-acre apple orchard, 25 acres of woodlot and do some commercial logging. They raise sheep, goats, hens, cattle, and pigs for meat, collect eggs and milk, and sell apples and apple products. The farm was designed to be diverse, and to allow elements to connect with and build upon one another. They are renovating the original barn for workshops and accommodation of apprentices and workers. Motivated by religious beliefs, Jan and Ted support ecological agriculture, as well as broader peace, justice, and environmental movements. In addition to supplying organic, environmentally-produced food while minimizing their ecological footprints, Jan and Ted help others learn small farming, horse farming, and organic farming techniques.

Annie is a student on the University of Guelph campus who has over 50 potted plants in the house and who works on a garden run by a Permaculture Working Group of the local Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG). The permaculture-inspired garden models many of the characteristic features and techniques of permaculture. The full design integrates horizontal, vertical and time dimensions; mimics nature; incorporates zones, and fosters true efficiency. It uses "waste" materials in novel ways (tires for the spiral herb garden structure, recycled bookshelves for a trellis, discarded carpet to make pathways); incorporates spiral and mandala shapes, trellises, native species and perennials; relies on soil and crop rotation, sheet mulching, and raised garden beds; and is planned based on zones. As well as furnishing a model passers-by

(students, university workers, and community members) can emulate, the garden provides the student gardeners with practical experience in permaculture design and with fresh, organic food for little or no cost.

Lori is a volunteer at the Two Rivers Neighbourhood Group (a volunteer-driven community group in Guelph that connects community members with support programs) who obtained land from the Catholic Diocese in the neighbourhood and coordinated a community garden. After its second season and with only \$200, the garden is now home to many trees, native and energy-saving species of plants, composters, a 12 rain-barrel catchment system and many neighbourhood gardening members. The gardens were built over top of existing grass using a sheet mulch process. All ages work at planting and tending the gardens. Workshops, bulletin boards, newsletters, and demonstration projects teach interested people how to garden using different organic and ecologically sound approaches. The landscape has been diversified, children and adults are getting exercise while learning how to grow food and eating the healthy products, and community is being built through the process.

Mary began her own landscaping business in Mississauga at age 24 with a wish to garden. She started designing and installing gardens for acquaintances and has since established her own business—The Natural Path Gardens. In the summer she is able to employ two additional people. Seeing a relative's permaculture farm in Australia and reading about permaculture herself, inspired Mary to integrate permaculture into her business. She is now able to provide a service to Guelph residents for more ecologically-minded clients. When possible, Mary enables clients to sheet mulch, to collect water on their property, to compost, to use companion planting and guilds, to include perennials such as herbs, plants for birds and butterflies, leguminous plants, and mulch plants, and to incorporate food in their garden (for example, by using fruit and berry trees as ornamentals). She selects clients to some extent, but also makes the most ecological choices possible, given the limits of tolerance of individual clients. In this way she is able to run a business that makes a positive contribution to the environment and which supports herself in work she believes is beneficial and enjoyable.

Conclusion

Whether landscaping yards; supporting a community or permaculture garden; supplying CSA members, farmers' markets, local restaurants and grocery stores, or naturopaths; or selling specialty crops commercially, innovative farm women and their colleagues are breaking the stranglehold multinational companies have on food producers. They are bringing new life to ecosystems decimated by monoculture farming and intensive pasturing. They are limiting their own footprints while providing healthy food for consumers; avoiding pollution

of water, soil and air; recycling materials and waste; and saving seeds for heritage varieties. One person at a time on one plot of land at a time, they are building a sustainable future and teaching others to do the same.

Karen Krug is an associate professor in the Centre for the Environment at Brock University. Her academic interests include agriculture, ethics and sustainability. She grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan.

¹For confidential purposes, all names have been changed.

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