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Reduction of Hunger and Poverty and the Social and Solidarity Economy

Judith Hitchman

RIPSS Intercontinental, and Urgenci International Community Supported Agriculture Network

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Abstract

Ending poverty and hunger is intrinsically linked to a need for system change. This change implies community empowerment and shifting to a social and solidarity economy (SSE)-based system. It implies ensuring decent work and income that enable people to access healthy, agroecologically-grown food as a human right. Community Land Trusts are an essential tool to protect the land from property speculation. Community Supported Agriculture is based on shared risks and benefits. There are also different ways of ensuring access to affordable food for consumers and decent income for producers. Ending hunger and poverty needs to be based on a human rights approach and paradigm change to the SSE.

Keywords

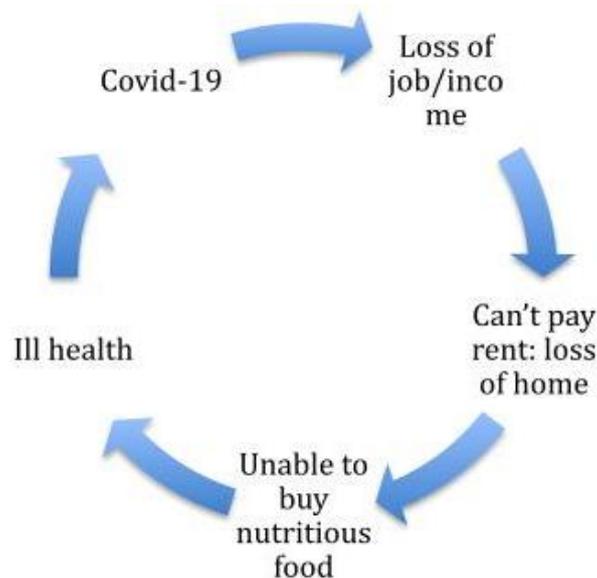
poverty; hunger; Community Land Trust; food sovereignty; agroecology; Community Supported Agriculture; right to food

Introduction

The first and second Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address ending poverty and hunger respectively. These are two key aspects of the overarching goals underlying the aspirations of the SDGs. Nevertheless, the economic system that underpins the SDGs remains that of capitalism, which by its very nature implies a growth paradigm that leads to social exclusion - an increase in wealth for the richest 1% comes at the expense of both people and the planet. The measures most widely proposed to end poverty and hunger are grounded in charity-based solutions and corporate social responsibility (greening the existing system), rather than in those that empower populations and communities to determine how best to achieve these aims.

Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) provides many real opportunities for overturning the above paradigm. It is important to note that the real underlying cause of hunger is poverty. The fact that the hungry are also generally either in precarious employment (including migrant workers), employed in the informal sector, living in geographical areas of conflict, and/or victims of the climate crisis, is significantly important. Malnutrition is affecting increasing numbers of the world's population, including both under-nutrition and over-nutrition into account. It is estimated that up to 25% of deaths in the world are due to some form of malnutrition (over- or under-nutrition combined). The most important reference document is the FAO annual SOFI report (FAO 2021b). This report shows that hunger and poverty are on the rise, a figure largely resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic impacts and job losses it has caused. The current rise in food prices caused by a conjunction of increased fossil fuel costs, affecting chemical inputs for industrial agriculture, and long value chain breakdown is also affecting people's ability – or lack thereof – to buy healthy nutritious food (FAO 2021a). In many cases around the world, the pandemic has produced the following vicious circle.

Figure 28.1: The vicious circle of food access



Source: Author

1. SSE solutions to poverty and hunger

The solutions of SSE have, on the contrary, provided significant responses to reverse this vicious circle and build resilience through a positive, virtuous circle of policy possibilities. The examples of the resilience of SSE responses to the pandemic are manifold. Some are illustrated in Figure 28.2.

Figure 28.2: The virtuous circle of resilience



Source: Author

The first element of policy that is of relevance is the formalisation of employment through cooperatives. One of the most relevant ways of overcoming poverty – and consequently hunger – is through the creation of small cooperatives at the local and community level. Formalising employment opens many doors in terms of gaining access to various safety nets including decent work and salaries.

The second element is the provision of land and housing. One of the areas most prone to speculation globally is that of land and housing. Community Land Trusts and cooperative housing are vital parts of SSE that protect agricultural land from speculation and construction. This is something mentioned in the New Urban Agenda (Habitat III 2017). Community Land Trusts are legally recognised in many different countries and on different continents. ‘A **community land trust (CLT)** is a nonprofit corporation that holds land on behalf of a place-based community, while serving as the long-term steward for affordable housing, community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and other community assets on behalf of a community. CLTs balance the needs of individuals who want security of tenure in occupying and using land and housing, with the needs of the surrounding community, striving to secure a variety of social purposes such as maintaining the affordability of local housing, preventing the displacement of vulnerable residents, and promoting economic and racial inclusion. Across the world, there is enormous diversity among CLTs in the ways that real property is owned, used, and operated and the ways that the CLT itself is guided and governed by people living on and around a CLT’s land.’ (Wikipedia 2021). The connection between ending food poverty and land ownership is one of the key aspects of SSE. Community Gardens are one of the

many ways in which urban communities can ensure access to food. (see the entry “Food and Agriculture Sector and SSE”).

2. The key lever in SSE to ensure the human right to food and nutrition is food sovereignty

The definition of food sovereignty used here is that generally accepted, and used in the Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty 2007 (Nyéléni.org 2007).

It is important to distinguish food sovereignty that entails empowerment of communities and peoples, from food security, simple access to sufficient food. If the food in question is based on industrial, over-processed products that have a high fat and sugar content and calories rather than nutrients, the outcome for communities is likely to be linked to the vicious rather than the virtuous circle. Access to healthy, local, nutritious foods through various SSE initiatives is generally based on short, and generally, direct supply chains. This is in stark opposition to the current general practice of the charity-based food banks, whose use has increased in many countries by up to 40% at the time of writing (Cohen et al. 2021).

A further example of communities creating their own food safety net through SSE practice during the pandemic is that of small-scale family farmers and landless people’s farms in Brazil gifting surplus production to those living in the favelas, thus framing food as part of the Commons and as a human right.

Community Supported Agriculture began in Japan in the late 1960s/early 1970s. It was the result of collaboration between housewives, who were concerned by the spread of Minamata disease which is caused by industrial pollution, and the Japanese Organic Agriculture Association (JOAA). Together, they created a direct purchasing scheme known as Teikei (meaning partnership or alliance). Teikei is based on 10 principles, developed by JOAA in 1978, jointly between producers and consumers. It is the oldest form of SSE associated with food (Japan Organic Agriculture Association 1978). The 10 principles are as follows:

1. *Principle of mutual assistance.* The essence of this partnership lies, not in trading itself, but in the friendly relationship between people. Therefore, both producers and consumers should help each other on the basis of mutual understanding. This relationship should be established through reflection on past experiences.

2. *Principle of intended production.* Producers should, through consultation with consumers, intend to produce the maximum amount and maximum variety of products within the capacity of the farm.

3. *Principle of accepting the produce.* Consumers should accept all the produce that has been grown according to the previous consultation between both groups, and their diet should depend as much as possible on this product.

4. *Principle of mutual concession in the price decision.* In deciding the price of the produce, producers should take full account of savings in labour and cost, due to grading and packaging processes being curtailed, as well as of all their products

being accepted. Additionally, consumers should take into full account the benefit of getting fresh, safe, and tasty foods.

5. *Principle of deepening friendly relationships.* The continuous development of this partnership requires the deepening of friendly relationships between producers and consumers. This will be achieved only through maximising contact between the partners.

6. *Principle of self-distribution.* On this principle, the transportation of produce should be carried out by either the producers' or consumers' groups without dependence on professional transporters.

7. *Principle of democratic management.* Both groups should avoid over-reliance upon a limited number of leaders in their activities, and try to practice democratic management with responsibility shared by all. The particular conditions of the members' families should be taken into consideration on the principle of mutual assistance.

8. *Principle of learning among each group.* Both groups of producers and consumers should attach high importance to learning from each other and should try to prevent their activities from ending only in the distribution of safe foods.

9. *Principle of maintaining the appropriate group scale.* The full practice of the matters written in the above articles will be difficult if the membership or the territory of these groups becomes too large. Therefore, they should both be kept to an appropriate size. The development of this movement in terms of membership should instead be promoted through increasing the number of groups and the collaboration among them.

10. *Principle of steady development.* In most cases, neither producers nor consumers will be able to enjoy such good conditions as mentioned above from the very beginning. Therefore, it is necessary for both parties to choose promising partners, even if their present situation is unsatisfactory, and to go ahead with the effort to advance in mutual cooperation.

Teikei was perhaps one of the first manifestations of a counter-power to the industrial food system and the global network. It became a key actor in bridging the food sovereignty and SSE movements. It spread to both the USA and Europe at the beginning of the 21st century, and based on these principles, URGENCI, the International Network of Community Supported Agriculture was founded in Aubagne, in France in 2004. According to the association's article 2 in the Articles of Association, URGENCI's mission is "... to further at the international level, local solidarity-based partnerships between producers and consumers. We define the solidarity-based partnership as an equitable commitment between farmers and consumers, where farmers receive fair remuneration, and consumers share the risks and rewards of sustainable agriculture" (URGENCI 2018). Today there are CSAs and networks in most countries, and on all continents, with Asia, Europe and North America as the strongest. The network represents approximately 3 million members of producers and consumers combined.

3. SSE organizations and enterprises (SSEOs) based on Teikei principles

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), on the basis of the Teikei principles outlined above, is thus innately part of SSE. The fundamental solidarity between producers and consumers ensures agreement to enable producers to access a decent living wage, irrespective of other events, such as climate or illness. However, the solidarity is, in many cases, carried much further, as in the case of many CSAs in the German SOLAWI (Solidarischelandwirtschaft) network, which is based on the system of a ‘bidding round’. In this system, the producers state the amount they need to earn for the next year (including investments etc.) in the annual general meeting with the consumers. The members of the CSA then discreetly write the amount that they can individually afford to pay for their annual share on a sheet of paper. If the total amounts to or exceeds the producers’ needs, all is well. If it is less, there is a second round of ‘bids’. The beauty of this system is that it incarnates the phrase first made by Louis Blanc in 1839 but later popularised by Marx: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Marx 1875).

It places food justice for eaters at the core, equally balanced with a fair and decent income for the producers. Other forms of SSE within CSA include an agreed number of solidarity shares for low-income families, farm contributions of food to soup kitchens, and “working” shares, in which the beneficiary does an agreed number of working hours per month on the farm. These various practises all form part of SSE and indeed contribute to the notion of food as part of the Commons (see the entry “the Commons and SSE”).

Co-operative food shops, genuine farmer’s markets, farmers’ collective shops, and the Open Food Network are all part of SSE in various ways. The role of local governments is also key in many areas, including solidarity public procurement from groups of local agroecological producers and social inclusion through support to access healthy local agroecological food either through CSAs or local farmers’ markets (see the entries “SSE and public policies” and “Financing for SSE”).

4. Food, health and SSE

The links between the food we eat and our health are manifold and deep. The issue is often one of access to affordable healthy nutritious food, as opposed to industrially made, over-processed foods. It is important to distinguish calories from nutrition. A growing number of hospitals in both the USA and the UK are now linking healthcare to the provision of fruit and vegetables, grown organically on their own or at locally sourced farms. This can be further strengthened by the role of local governments supporting access to healthy, nutritious, locally sourced foods.

The link between soil health and human health is also paramount. Industrial agriculture uses large amounts of chemical inputs that affect both soil and human health in a detrimental manner (Terre Solidaire, POLLINIS, and BASIC 2021). On the other hand, recent studies on nutrition have also shown the vital importance of soil health in human health. Soil health is dependent on natural amendments from compost, manure and crop rotation. The human microbiome, largely responsible for our health, has also been proven to mirror the soil microbiome of the food we eat (Ochoa-Hueso 2017). Other studies have shown that the nutritional value of agroecologically grown local food is higher than that of foods that have been transported long distances, conserved for long periods of time, or processed (many greens lose about 30% of their vitamins in the first 3 days)(Eng 2013). Taken together, it is clear that our nutritional wellbeing is closely linked to how the food has been grown, and also to its geographical proximity.

Seasonality is also an important factor for sustainable local food systems and our health (SDG 2.4). All these elements are key to ending malnutrition (SDG 2.2) when linked to food justice and the right to food (Hitchman 2019). SSE is one of the 10 Elements of agroecology as recognised by FAO (FAO 2018). As such this is an important recognition of the role of SSE in the production of healthy, sustainable food.

Conclusion

The interconnection between ending poverty and ending hunger can be seen as deeply intertwined. The role of SSE in changing the vicious circle into a virtuous circle is a clear challenge for society, and one that can only be met by deep systemic change, the introduction of an economic vision based on SSE, and the sharing (rather than accumulation) of wealth. These questions need to be considered in a holistic manner that encompasses the overall economic system and includes a human rights-based approach, to the right to food and nutrition.

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