

Does Healthy Food Include Farmworkers' Well-Being?

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Disparities: Any Leading Pathways?*
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“Environmental Justice” Must Be Understood Holistically and Historically

- “Environment” is shaped by the complex interplay between different facets of historical and socioeconomic dynamics affecting food production, distribution, and consumption.
- And the physical environment of occupational health cannot be neatly separated from its socioeconomic, cultural, and political setting.
- A “deep ecology” approach is needed to understand how farmworkers’ well-being is linked to healthy food.
- For migrants, spatial discontinuities in personal, family, and community life pose unique challenges—a transnational “environment” in which they live as a result of global food production system structure.
- Consequently, in order to work for “justice” one needs to go well beyond basic (usually flawed) assumptions as to how public policy and private sector practices interact to shape the social and political universe of transnational life.

Looking at the Big Picture....The Consequences of Technological Progress

- Agricultural production has become increasingly global—the quintessential 21st century industry—but relying on labor practices from centuries past.
- Regional food systems are now almost a century old—in the U.S., an outgrowth of railroads, public water projects, later interstate highways. Now fresh food production is global—due to air freight, controlled atmosphere storage, refrigeration.
- The size of production units in the fruit, vegetable, horticultural sector have steadily increased and generates labor demands that can't be met locally.
- Arguably, flexible production and more diverse food choices led to “more healthy” food.
- However, regional/global production has inevitably driven long-distance labor migration. So we must ask how does long-distance migration affect farmworkers' well-being?

Looking at the Food Supply Chain: from Farm to Table.....

- Producers get about 25–30% of the retail price of food although the amount varies greatly by commodity (Martin 2010).
- Less than 30% of producer revenue goes to agricultural labor—and these labor data (based on the Census of Agriculture) include the cost of labor intermediaries—farm labor contractors, mayordomos.
- The resulting equation $30\% \times 30\% = 9\%$. Farm labor accounts for a minimal portion of Americans' food expenditures. Packaging amounts to about 8%. And consumers expenditures for food amount to only 11% of disposable income—a national policy of cheap food.
- Inevitably, we can also ask if this economic allocation is “fair” and, whether or not it’s “fair”, what impact does it have on farmworker earnings, living conditions, lifestyle, health—i.e. overall well-being?
- Part of fairness is exposure to risk. Not only is farmwork poorly-paid. Most workers risk long spells without any work or short days which don't yield enough to live on (e.g. 3 hrs. work @ \$8.00/hr).

“Peripheralization of the Core”: Historically inevitable or not?

- Farmworkers’ remittances (perhaps 1 / 4 of total flows to Mexico) provide more than \$6 billion for migrants’ family members and community investment in sending villages—but at what cost to the solo (usually male) migrant wage earners living in a foreign country?
- Debate continues about “the right to stay home” and “the right to migrate—mirror images of each other? And, if so, what policies might make it less painful either to migrate or to stay at home?
- How should the real-world political debate about circular migration (guestworker programs) and immigration reform provisions for legalization be resolved if we believe that healthy food is compatible with farmworker well-being?
- Quite practically, what should the US Department of Labor (and other federal agencies) do right now to clearly articulate and improve migrant workers’ human rights? Do human rights include a right to decent housing? Safe transportation? Lifelong learning? Freedom from psychological abuse?

“Erosion of the Periphery”—What are the impacts of long-distance migration?

- Nortenizacion—how does long-distance migration affect family life and, specifically, child-rearing and youth development?
- With about 300,000 farmworkers coming to the U.S. each year and 1 out of 5 from an indigenous community, how does the resulting loss of Amerindian languages and erosion of cultural capital affect farmworkers’ well-being?
- How well have traditional indigenous communities, now governed via *usos y costumbres*, managed to adapt to the absence of working-age male migrants? Impacts on gender equity? Migrants’ fulfillment of cargos?
- How do farmworkers themselves (and their families) assess the balance between opportunity and risk? And objectively what are the short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes?
- Ultimately, looking at dynamics of periphery/core, individual and family life, family life and community life—what metrics should be used for assessing “well being”?

Transnational Labor Recruitment and the Contemporary Food Supply System

- Seasonal production of fresh produce gives rise to predictable peaks and troughs in aggregate labor demand but the system is structured to de-couple migration from employment security—drawing more job-seekers than needed since labor surpluses drive down labor cost.
- The evidence is clear. Physically, migration poses huge risk to migrants' well-being—death or injury in the desert, in being transported by immigrant smugglers.
- Psychologically, teenagers' separation from their families and hometowns (and most migrants do first come north as adolescents) is burdensome and contributes to substance abuse and risky sex.
- Wives and children's separation from migrant male heads of household gives rise to a multitude of problems and the evidence is that depression and substance abuse are on the rise in migrant-sending communities as well as in the labor camps where solo migrants are housed.

Peripheralization of the Core: Fresno County—March, 2010

- Economic recession, unpredictable employment, and tightened border control are increasing MSFW homelessness
- This worker and scores of others are waiting for work in orchard thinning (to assure larger apricots and peaches meeting the standards of USDA/industry marketing orders)
- Another of the most unpredictable crops are Oregon strawberries—with weather from Gulf of Alaska and California leaving workers idled for days at a time



21st Century Cost Control in Florida: Orange Juice and Fresh Tomatoes for Fast Food

- The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the U.S. Department of Justice have prosecuted 7 major slavery cases over the past decade.
- An article in The Independent (UK) describes the conditions in a winter, 2007 farmworker slavery case (now won).
- "Three Florida fruit-pickers, held captive and brutalised by their employer for more than a year, finally broke free of their bonds by punching their way through the ventilator hatch of the van in which they were imprisoned. Once outside, they dashed for freedom. When they found sanctuary one recent Sunday morning, all bore the marks of heavy beatings to the head and body.... Police would learn later that another man had his hands chained behind his back every night to prevent him escaping, leaving his wrists swollen. The migrants ...were locked up at night and had to pay for sub-standard food. If they took a shower with a garden hose or bucket, it cost them \$5."
- This is not an aberration. It is a predictable consequence of a production system designed with layer upon layer of labor intermediaries to insulate producers (mostly large vertically-integrated production-packing-marketing firms) from responsibility

Fresh Apples and Asparagus in Washington and in California, more slavery....

- Piece rate payment supposedly adjusts for varying productivity in different fields—but doesn't. In a 1992 CAW study we found piece rate based payment for asparagus workers ranged from \$3.86 to \$7.68 per hour and for apple pickers from \$5.21 to \$10.53.
- In 1996 we found similar disparities among payments to orange pickers in Okeechobee, FL some paid as little as \$7 per 1,000 lb. tub of oranges while others got \$9–10.
- Small farmers—most now forced out of business—could not compete in Yakima because vertically-integrated packer-shippers manipulated prices so apples sold at less than the cost of production.
- Spikes in apple labor demand resulted from production for controlled atmosphere storage of “fresh” apples and, in asparagus from transnational competition
- In Yakima County, we interviewed workers camped out by the river and others were living in horse stables.
- In 2000, California asparagus cutters were held captive in substandard living conditions on an island in the Sacramento River Delta—about 20 miles from the state capital.

Fresh salads and other less healthy crops...

- In our 1999–2000 national study for DOL we found relatively few young children working in the fields. Only 13% of farmworkers had begun working in the fields before age 14.
- But the child labor workforce was concentrated in a few “healthy food” crops: strawberries, blueberries, asparagus, and table grapes
- And teens also work in a few less healthy crops...most notably, tobacco production....We heard from Triqui migrants, in Canada’s “model” guestworker program, they would never do that work again due to persistent nausea, headaches, and Anglo food.
- Despite the social engagement of some “slow food” advocates in issues of worker justice, and progressive groups such as the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) it is not clear that production conditions are significantly different (except for pesticide non-use) at organic or “local watershed” farms

The Bottom Line—Chronic Problems

- The dynamics of demand and supply for fresh healthy food is almost inevitably linked to the sharp spikes and troughs of labor demand which drive the treadmill of Mexico/Guatemala—US migration.
- However, field work per se does not hurt farmworkers' well-being as much the transnational system of labor recruitment and management—the configuration of the broader “food system”.
- Labor-intensive fruit, vegetable, horticultural production continues to rely on labor intermediaries—some of whom seriously mistreat or cheat workers.
- “Farmers” (now mostly large agribusiness) continue to abjure responsibility for worker treatment while appealing to 19th century romantic notions of wresting a living from the land as a core lobbying message.
- Immigration reform faces stiff political headwinds and migrants still die in border-crossing. With decreasing migration flows due to the recession—total deaths are down but deaths as % of total has increased during the past decade. (ACLU 2009)

Tempered with Hopes for Progress in the U.S. Agribusiness Context...

- It is increasingly clear that economic justice would be affordable. The Campaign for Fair Food's demand for a 1 ¢/lb. increase in piece rate wages to Florida tomato workers would yield a 70% increase in workers' earnings.
- In 2008 healthy food retailer Whole Foods joined unhealthy food retailers (Taco Bell, Burger King, McDonalds) in signing on to the campaign
- On May 17, 2010 Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis went to Immokalee, FL to announce a new DOL initiative—"Podemos Ayudar" to beef up Wage and Hour enforcement and publicize the U Visa as a means for workers in indentured servitude to testify against traffickers. These are good initiatives.
- Smaller organic farms do seem to rely more on direct-hire farmworkers. Thus, increases in consumer demands for local, fresh produce may indirectly improve farmworker well-being.

Confronting The Issue of Transnational Migration and Well-Being in Sending Villages

- Asencio Commission research (pre-IRCA) pointed to the problem of remittances fueling local inflation in migrant-sending villages. Even the economic benefits may be illusory.
- In many cases--the presumed economic benefits never materialized. Homes which were to be built with "migra-dollars" were never finished. Many are vacant—awaiting the owners' uncertain retirement (without pensions? without Social Security due to current labor practices?)
- Post-IRCA—with only moderate border control efforts and minimal employer verification, shuttle migration was somewhat feasible—meaning that seasonal peaks and troughs of work could be ameliorated (although the costs of migration were still borne by migrants, not their employers or consumers).
- The situation in migrant-sending communities has gotten worse over the past decade. Efforts to deploy remittances for local job creation have been very challenging.

A Systems Approach is Needed to Address These Multi-Faceted Problems

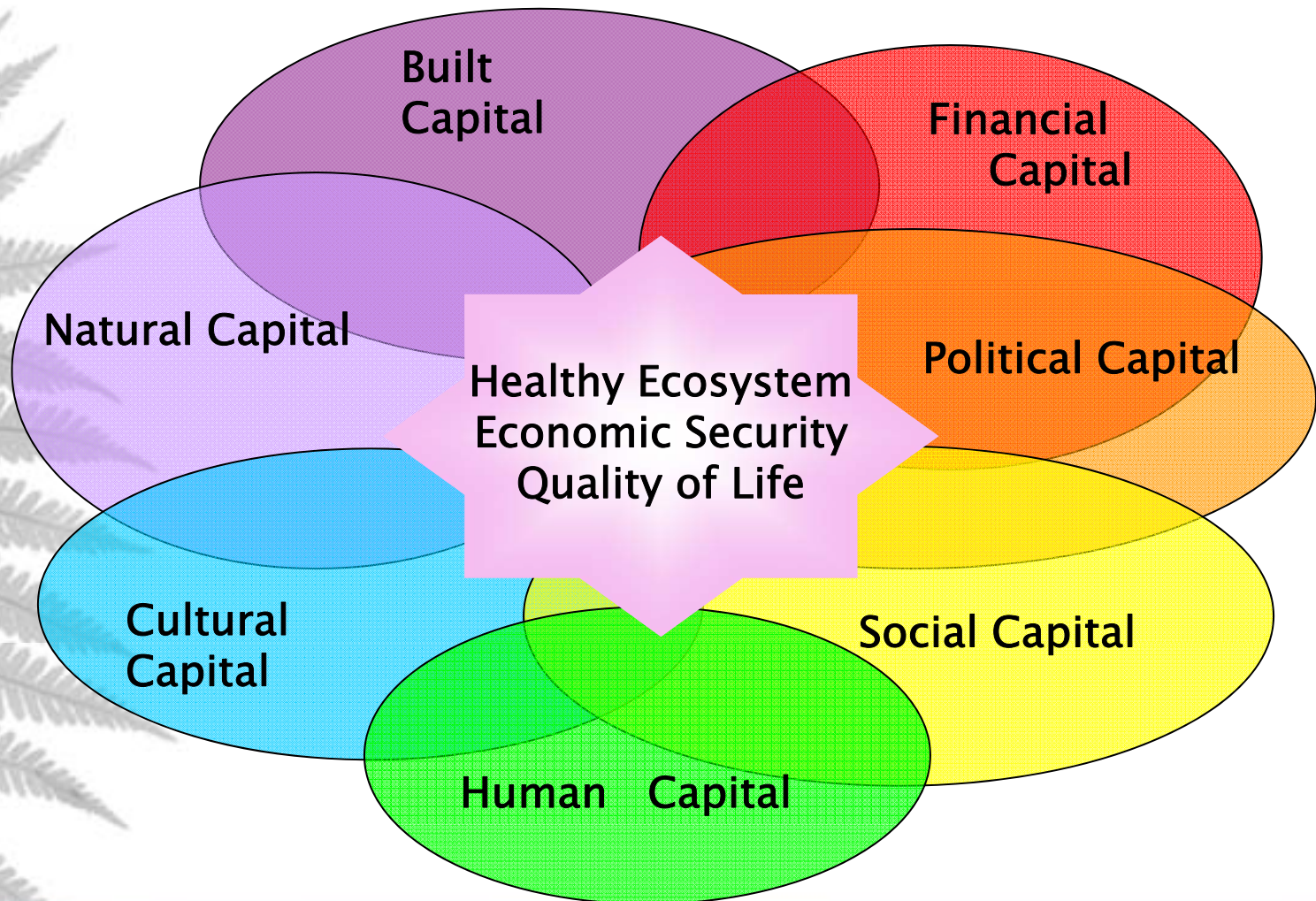
- The traditional mainstream approach of sorting problems into distinct conceptual domains and policy categories fails to provide guidance for innovative (or even effective!) solutions
- Worse still, efforts to coordinate the efforts of disparate bureaucracies which arise from the initial categorization of distinct “small” problems inevitably has limitations in terms of cost-effectiveness.
- Transnational strategies are required in order to impact transnational systems of labor recruitment and management and the lives of migrants living in transnational communities.
- Policy analysis, as well as program planning, must shift from “economic development” to “social development” strategies.
- Even hard-core World Bank analyses of poverty reduction strategies have come to acknowledge the social, cultural, and civic dimensions of human life and advocate for holistic approaches.

Multiple Types of Capital Which Affect Community, Family, & Individual Well-Being

- There is a huge literature on social capital as a determinant of health—yet also controversy as to how best to visualize the concept and analyze its' impact on health and well-being.
- It is clear that social capital has a direct strong impact on “behavioral health” and constantly-growing evidence how that impacts physical outcomes (e.g. substance abuse, obesity, STD's,)
- Cornelia and Jan Flora have made an important contribution in this realm by distinguishing multiple forms of “capital”, i.e. Societal resources that can be drawn upon to accomplish specific (individual or collective) objectives related to well-being.
- This visualization provides a sound framework for considering the relationship between healthy food for consumers and farmworkers' well-being.
- It applies both to transnational or “network” communities and local communities where farmworkers live and work (which I consider to be nodes/”neighborhoods” in cross-border migration networks)

Visualization of Multiple Community Capitals

(Developed by Jan Flora and Cornelia Flora)



What Have We Learned, How Can We Move Forward?

- Acknowledge the huge role non-formal networks play—especially in farmworker communities where the “rule of law” (role and functioning of formal institutions) is weak.
- Recognize the linkage of individual, family, and community well-being and that, for long-distance migrants, there is no boundary between “workplace” and “life”. The most problematic “working conditions” are living conditions.
- Rely on social networks, workers themselves as resources for uncovering worker abuse and facilitate their partnering with the authorities to address the issues
- Support efforts to preserve and strengthen resources of migrants’ cultural capital—in migrant-sending communities and in migrant-receiving communities. These can be drawn upon in practical ways to improve (psychological and physical) well-being.
- Invest in innovative strategies such as the Campaign for Fair Food to mobilize consumers to force changes which ripple down through the food system in order to leverage producer accountability.

And Last But Not Least— Work Transnationally for Positive Change

- Begin to build migrants' awareness of their human and labor rights in a transnational labor market—starting in their hometown sending communities and continuing in destination areas.
- Start early on empowering migrant workers! Offer workshops for young teens 13–15 about the realities of long-distance migration and how the food system works (starting with enganchadores, continuing with coyotes, guias, raiteros, contratistas).
- Build prospective migrants' math skills to prepare them to navigate the complex economics of a labor market with chronic underemployment, piece rate pay, and processes to offload production costs onto the workers.
- Advocate for immigration reform with genuine, affordable amnesty.
- If a guestworker program is part of immigration reform (as it almost surely will be) develop innovative, non-bureaucratic approaches—in both Mexico and the US—to make protection of worker rights more than a rhetorical flourish