**Headline**: The Globalized, Industrialized Food System Is Destroying the World—We Urgently Need to Support Local Food Economies

**Teaser**: Our food system is linked to an economic system fundamentally biased against what’s good for people and the planet.

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**[Article Body:]**

We can thank small farmers, environmentalists, academic researchers, and food and farming activists for advancing ecologically sound food production methods. [Agroecology](https://www.globalagriculture.org/report-topics/agroecology.html), [holistic resource management](https://www.permalogica.com/post/holistic-management-a-comprehensive-overview), [permaculture](https://permacultureprinciples.com/), and other methods can address many of the global food system’s worst impacts, including biodiversity loss, energy depletion, toxic pollution, food insecurity, and massive carbon emissions.

These inspiring testaments to human ingenuity and goodwill have two things in common: They involve smaller-scale farms adapted to local conditions and depend more on human attention and care than energy and technology. In other words, they are the opposite of industrial monocultures—huge farms that grow just one crop.

However, to significantly reduce the many negative impacts of the food system, these small-scale initiatives need to spread worldwide. Unfortunately, this has not happened because the transformation of farming requires shifting not just how food is produced but also how it is marketed and distributed. The food system is inextricably linked to an economic system that, for decades, has been fundamentally biased against the kinds of changes we need.

**Destructive Food Policies**

Put simply, economic policies almost everywhere have systematically promoted ever-larger scale and monocultural production. Those policies include:

* Massive subsidies for globally traded commodities. For example, most farm subsidies in the United States [go to just five commodities](https://farm.ewg.org/subsidyprimer.php)—corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, and rice—that are the centerpieces of the global food trade. At the same time, government programs like the U.S. [Market Access Program](https://www.fas.usda.gov/programs/market-access-program-map) provide hundreds of millions of dollars to expand international markets for agricultural products.
* Direct and hidden subsidies for global transport infrastructures and fossil fuels. Research from [EarthTrack](https://www.earthtrack.net/document/protecting-nature-reforming-environmentally-harmful-subsidies-update) shows that in 2024, $2.6 trillion will be spent annually on environmentally harmful subsidies, equivalent to 2.5 percent of the global GDP.
* ‘Free trade’ policies that open up food markets in virtually every country to global agribusinesses. The 1994 NAFTA agreement, for example, forced [Mexico’s small corn producers to compete with heavily subsidized large-scale farms](https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/08/07/541671747/nafta-s-broken-promises-these-farmers-say-they-got-the-raw-end-of-trade-deal) in the U.S. The 2018 [re-negotiation of NAFTA](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trade-nafta/canada-ready-to-allow-u-s-dairy-access-in-nafta-talks-sources-idUSKCN1LR21E) did the same to Canadian dairy farmers.
* Health and safety regulations are indeed required for large-scale production and distribution. However, these regulations destroy smaller producers and marketers and are not enforced for giant monopolies. For example, [the number of small cheese producers in France has shrunk by 90 percent,](https://www.newsweek.com/2014/08/29/french-cheesemakers-crippled-eu-health-measures-266799.html) thanks mainly to European Union food safety laws.

These policies provide a substantial competitive advantage to large monocultural producers, corporate processors, and marketers, so industrially produced food shipped from the other side of the world is generally less expensive than food from the farm next door.

The environmental costs of this bias are huge. Monocultures rely heavily on chemical inputs—fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides, and pesticides—which pollute the immediate environment, put wildlife at risk, and—through nutrient runoff—create [“dead zones” in waters hundreds or thousands of miles away](https://truthout.org/articles/corporate-food-brands-driving-the-massive-dead-zone-in-gulf-of-mexico/).

Monocultures also heavily depend on fossil fuels to run large-scale equipment and transport raw and processed foods worldwide, significantly contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Scientists estimate the global food system’s greenhouse gas toll to be [one-third of total emissions](https://www.nature.com/news/one-third-of-our-greenhouse-gas-emissions-come-from-agriculture-1.11708).

There are also social and economic costs. In the industrialized world, smaller producers can’t survive, and their land is amalgamated into the [holdings of ever-larger farms,](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/big-farms-are-getting-bigger-and-most-small-farms-arent-really-farms-at-all/) [decimating rural and small-town economies and threatening public health](https://sraproject.org/factory-farms-destroy-communities/). In developing economies, the same forces pull people off the land [by the hundreds of millions](https://libcom.org/library/global-industrial-working-class), [leading to poverty](https://orionmagazine.org/article/slum-ecology/), [rapidly swelling urban slums](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-cities/worlds-slums-grow-despite-rapid-economy-growth-u-n-idUSTRE62I46020100319?sp=true), and [waves of economic refugees](https://tinyurl.com/yalcfwv2). Uprooted small farmers quickly spiral into unemployment, poverty, resentment, and anger.

There are also risks to food security. With global economic policies homogenizing the world’s food supply, the 7,000 species of plants used as food crops in the past have been [reduced to 150 commercially important crops](https://tinyurl.com/y8ak9hj8), with rice, wheat, and maize accounting for 60 percent of the global food supply. Varieties within those few crops have been chosen for their responsiveness to chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation water—and for their ability to withstand long-distance transport.

A similar calculus is applied to livestock and poultry breeds, [skewed toward those that can grow rapidly](https://www.saveourantibiotics.org/the-issue/antibiotic-overuse-in-livestock-farming/) with grain inputs and antibiotics in confined animal feeding operations. The loss of diversity even extends to the size and shape of food products: harvesting machinery, transport systems, and supermarket chains all require standardization.

The result is that more than [half of the world’s food varieties have been lost](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2011/07/food-ark/) over the past century; in countries like the U.S., the loss is [more than 90 percent](https://rafiusa.org/blog/protecting-the-food-ark/). The global food system rests on a dangerously narrow base. Without the genetic variety that can supply resilience, the food system is vulnerable to catastrophic losses from disease and the disruptions of a changing climate.

**The Benefits of Local Food**

The solution to these problems involves more than a commitment to ecological models of food production; it also requires a commitment to local food economies. Localization systematically alleviates several environmental issues inherent in the global food system by:

* reducing the distance that food travels, thereby lessening the energy needed for transport, as well as the attendant greenhouse gas emissions;
* reducing the need for packaging, processing, and refrigeration (which all but disappears when producers sell directly to consumers, thus reducing waste and energy use);
* reducing monoculture, as farms producing for local or regional markets have an incentive to diversify their production, which makes organic production more feasible, in turn reducing the toxic load on surrounding ecosystems;
* providing more niches for wildlife to occupy through diversified organic farms;
* and supporting the principle of diversity on which ecological farming—and life itself—is based by favoring production methods best suited to particular climates, soils, and resources.

Local food provides many other benefits. Smaller-scale farms that produce for local and regional markets require more human intelligence, care, and work than monocultures, thus creating more employment opportunities. In developing nations, a commitment to local food would stem the pressures driving millions of farmers off the land.

Local food is also good for rural and small-town economies. It provides more on-farm employment and supports the many local businesses on which farmers depend.

Food security is also strengthened because varieties are chosen based on their suitability to diverse locales, not the demands of supermarket chains or long-distance transport. This strengthens agricultural biodiversity.

Local food is also healthier. Since it doesn’t need to travel so far, local food is far fresher than global food, and since it doesn’t rely on monocultural production, it can be produced without toxic chemicals that can contaminate food.

**Countering the Myths**

Although local food is an incredibly effective solution multiplier, agribusiness has gone to great lengths to convince the public that large-scale industrial food production is the only way to feed the world.

Big business is co-opting what now is a worldwide local food movement by shifting the focus to “regenerative” agriculture. This narrower focus on just the mode of production obscures the vital importance of shorter distances. Shortening the distances between the farm and the consumer and creating more self-reliant economies is the biggest threat to global corporations.

One of the biggest proponents of regenerative agricultureis Bayer, the Big Pharma/Big Ag corporation that bought Monsanto and sells glyphosate worldwide (among other horrible products).

“Produce More. Restore Nature. Scale Regenerative Agriculture. That’s our vision for the future of farming,”the company [states](https://www.bayer.com/en/agriculture/regenerativeag) on its website. The company further [says](https://www.bayer.com/en/agriculture/article/gene-editing-koku-lenzi) regenerative agriculture is the “Future of Climate-Smart Farming. It’s all about regenerative farming systems and listening to farmers’ voices.”

But the global food economy is massively inefficient. The need for standardized products means tons of edible food are destroyed or left to rot. This is one reason more than one-third of the global food supply is wasted or lost; for the U.S., the figure is [closer to one-half](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/american-food-waste/491513/).

The logic of global trade results in massive quantities of identical products being simultaneously imported *and* exported—a needless waste of fossil fuels and an enormous addition to greenhouse gas emissions. In a typical year, for example, the U.S. imports [more than](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/livestock-and-meat-international-trade-data/) [400,000 tons of potatoes](https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?programArea=veg&groupName=Vegetables&commodityName=Potatoes&ID=17858#Pb63812f352e3419792c39497a2ee20d4_2_292) and [1 million tons of beef](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/livestock-and-meat-international-trade-data/) while exporting almost the same tonnage. The same is true of many other food commodities and countries.

The same logic leads to shipping foods worldwide simply to reduce labor costs for processing. Shrimp harvested off the coast of Scotland, for example, are shipped 6,000 miles to Thailand to be peeled, then [shipped 6,000 miles back to the UK to be sold to consumers](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1534286/12000-mile-trip-to-have-seafood-shelled.html).

The supposed efficiency of monocultural production is based on output per unit of labor, which is maximized by replacing jobs with chemical- and energy-intensive technology. Measured by output per acre, however—a far more relevant metric—smaller-scale farms are typically [8 to 20 times more productive](https://foodfirst.org/publication/on-the-benefits-of-small-farms/).

This is partly because monocultures, by definition, produce just one crop on a given plot of land. At the same time, smaller, diversified farms allow [intercropping](https://foodfirst.org/publication/on-the-benefits-of-small-farms/)—using the spaces between rows of one crop to grow another. Moreover, the labor ‘efficiencies’ of monocultural production are linked to large-scale equipment, which limits [the farmer’s ability to tend to or harvest small portions of a crop](https://www.localfutures.org/7-billion-for-dinner-heres-how-to-feed-them/), thereby increasing yields.

**Making the Shift**

For more than a generation, the message to farmers has been to “get big or get out” of farming, and many of the remaining farmers have tailored their methods to what makes short-term economic sense within a deeply flawed system.

To avoid bankrupting those farmers, the shift from global to local would need to take place with care, providing incentives for farmers to diversify their production, reduce their reliance on chemical inputs and fossil fuel energy, and seek markets closer to home. Those incentives would go hand-in-hand with reductions in subsidies for the industrial food system.

After decades of policy bias toward global food, local and regional governments are taking steps in this direction. In the U.S., for example, most states have enacted “[cottage food laws](https://nationalaglawcenter.org/state-compilations/cottagefood/)” that relax the restrictions on the small-scale production of jams, pickles, and other preserved foods, allowing them to be [processed and sold locally without needing expensive commercial kitchens](https://www.chlpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/FINAL_Cottage-Food-Laws-Report_2013.pdf).

Several towns in the state of Maine have gone even further. Seeking to bypass the restrictive regulations that make it challenging to market local foods, they have declared “food sovereignty” by passing ordinances that give their citizens the right “[to produce, process, sell, purchase, and consume local foods of their choosing](https://www.localfoodrules.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/D09_LFCSGO_PDF-Template.pdf).”

In 2013, the government of Ontario, Canada, [passed a Local Food Act](https://news.ontario.ca/omafra/en/2013/11/bill-to-promote-local-food-passes-final-vote.html) to increase access to local food, improve local food literacy, and provide tax credits for farmers who donate a portion of their produce to nearby food banks.

In 2018, Congress passed a similar act, the [2018 Farm Bill](https://www.fb.org/issue/farm-policy/farm-bill#issueoverview). The Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP), established under the 2018 Farm Bill, aims to enhance the availability and accessibility of locally produced foods by providing funding for farmers’ markets, food hubs, and other local food initiatives. This supports small and mid-sized farmers in reaching new markets, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, and strengthening local economies.

However, as the 2018 Farm Bill [expired on September 30, 2024](https://www.katc.com/vermilion-parish/local-farmers-urge-congress-to-act-as-key-farm-bill-expires), farmers are anxious about their financial survival due to outdated provisions that fail to address current economic challenges. Experts warn that without a new bill, farmers could face significant losses and jeopardize the nation’s food supply.

Even bolder action is needed if there is to be any hope of eliminating the damage done by the global food system. A crucial first step is to raise awareness of the costs of the current system and the multiple benefits of local food. No matter how many studies demonstrate the virtues of alternative ways of producing and distributing food, the destructive global food system is unlikely to change unless there is heavy pressure from the grassroots to change the entire system. That needs to start now.